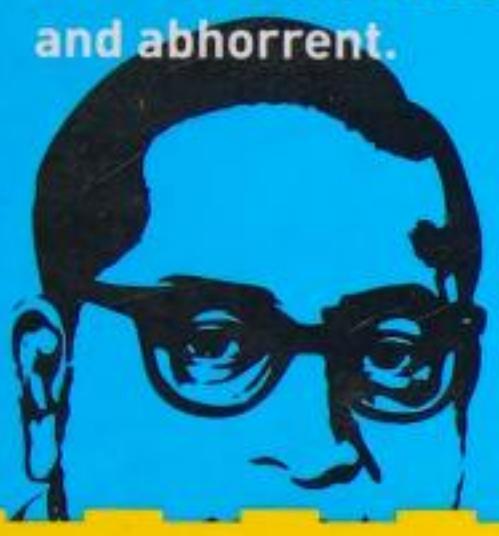
I find the four-varna system revolting. There is no other social system in the world that is as base and abhorrent.



I will never destroy brahmins and allow nonbrahmins to take their place. The brahmin must always be our guru.

If that is so, it is impossible to bring about any reform. Anything we do that is founded on caste is bound to collapse.

We will not be able to found a nation.

I do not believe that caste has anything to do with reli-gion. Caste is a custom. It is the duty of the brahmin to look after the cleansing of human souls, and of the bhangi to look after the cleansing of human bodies.

You are a vaishya by birth, a grocer. When it came to choosing your profession, you set aside the weighing scales, and picked up your law books and became a barrister.

THE STRENGTH OF OUR WRISTS

3 Plays PREMANAND GAJVEE

TRANSLATED BY SHANTA GOKHALE AND M.D. HATKANANGALEKAR

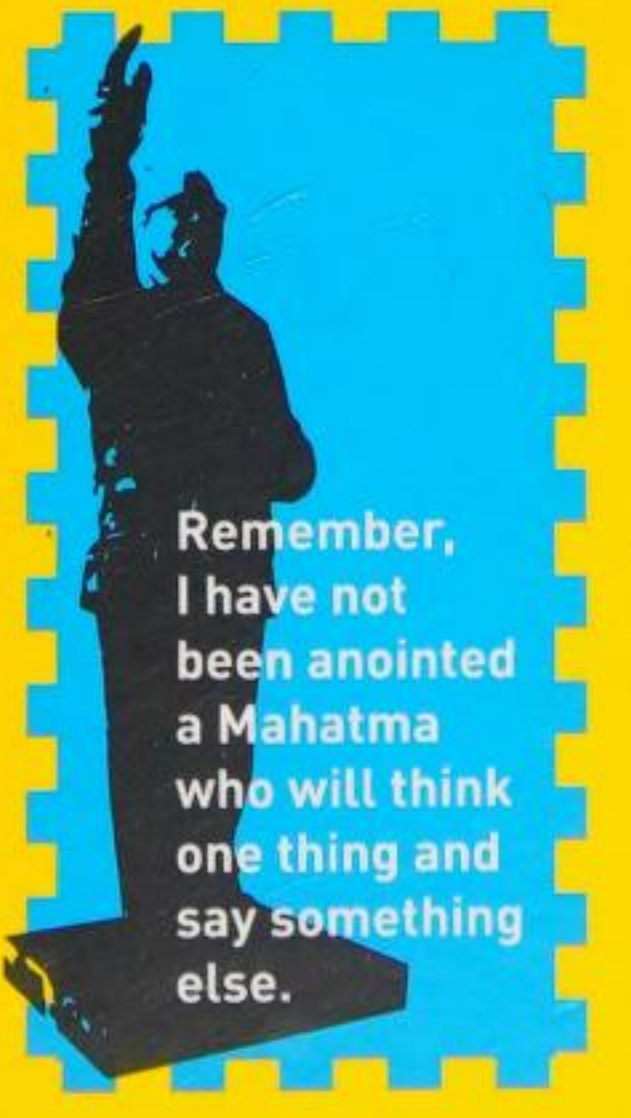
navayana

If you doubt my purpose, what can I do to satisfy you?

Should I not doubt the purpose of a Mahatma who believes that the work of a brahmin and a bhangi is equally meritorious?

Look here Dr Ambedkar. If you are going to say things like this...

Did my words sting you?



Remember, I have not been anointed a Mahatma who will think one thing and say something else.

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Premanand Gajvee is a prominent Marathi playwright. After storming the Marathi stage with his one-act *Ghotbhar Pani* (A Sip of Water) in 1977, which has been staged over 3,000 times, Gajvee has written eleven one-acts and thirteen full-length plays, besides a novel, two short story collections, and a volume of poetry. He co-founded the Bodhi Natya Parishad in Mumbai in 2003 with the aim of encouraging new, socially relevant plays in Marathi.

Shanta Gokhale is a writer and a theatre critic equally felicitous in Marathi and English. She has written two novels and two plays in Marathi. She is the author of *Playwright at the Centre: Marathi Drama From 1843 to the Present* (2000), and editor of *Satyadev Dubey: A Fifty-Year Journey through Theatre* (2012). Her novel *Tya Varshi*, which won the Maharashtra State Award in 2009, has been translated into English as *Crowfall* (2013). Shanta lives in Mumbai.

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© Translation *Kirwant*, M.D. Hatkanangalekar
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The Strength of Our Wrists

Three Plays

PREMANAND GAJVEE

translated by Shanta Gokhale
and M.D. Hatkanangalekar

navayana

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Ghotbhar Pani

A Sip of Water

translated by

Shanta Gokhale

(*The curtain rises. Two youths appear. The noonday sun burns overhead. The exhausted young men are panting for shade but everything around is barren, desolate, stunted. The grass, dried yellow, glints in the sun.*)

ONE: Roast. Roast us, you son-of-a-bitch.

TWO: It's blistering. Not a tree, not one.

ONE: Sit. (*Finds a comparatively grassy patch and sits down*) Sit down. (TWO *sits beside him.*) People sit in the shade of trees. We'll sit in the shade of the sun. You can sit in my shade. You're exhausted, aren't you?

TWO: Hand me the water-bag. I'm parched.

ONE: (*Unscrews the cap of the water-bag and tilts it;* TWO *cups his palms, dying for a gulp of water. His palms remain empty.*) Drink, drink.

TWO: Drink what? You're not pouring.

ONE: Pour from where? (*Jerks the water-bag to show there's nothing in it*)

TWO: You're joking.

ONE: Never. There may be no alternative to a life insurance policy. But there is to water. At least on this difficult occasion.

TWO: What?

ONE: Shivambu! Partake of your own morning piddle—the ultimate holy water!

TWO: Don't joke!

ONE: You were drinking away merrily when you weren't thirsty. Now wait till we get to a river or a village.

TWO: This rustic life is sheer death.

ONE: Will you show death as 'rural life' in your research paper on the village? Wait, here's an old man coming our way. Let's ask him if there's a river or…

TWO: I'll ask. (ONE *assumes the role of an old man.* ONE *and* TWO *will change roles throughout the play.*) How far's the village from here, grandpa?

ONE: Ye're asking me?

TWO: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ONE: Which village are ye comin' from, sir?

TWO: From very, very far.

ONE: Ye mean from the city?

TWO: Right. That's right.

ONE: Thought so. Go straight past those four fields. See the bushes and trees? Go past them, cross the river and ye're there.

TWO: (*in English*) Thank you.

ONE: What's that?

TWO: (*in Marathi*) I said … er … dhanyavaad.

ONE: I see. (*The old man disappears.* ONE *appears.*) Come on mate, step smart. Meanwhile, let me create a whole ocean for your thirst.

(*Sings*)

My eyes in your eyes
Deep blue Arabian Sea
Waves surge at the shore
That's not the truth
The seabed is vast
And still, utterly still.

TWO: A sip of water … Beautiful. Truly beautiful! They say this land runs with sweet water springs. Here's another picture…

Ganga, Yamuna, Goda, Kaveri
All rivers of female sex
And how does the water flow?
Though of neuter gender?
Barren, without purushartha
This civilization
Lives in the famine of tradition

The earth too is cracked, mouth gaping
Soil won't let soil have
A sip of water.

◗

(TWO *is halfway through lifting his cupped palms to his mouth.*)

ONE: Get away, bastard! You've polluted the river, you lowborn corpse-burner.

TWO: Just one sip of water, master. My mouth is dry, my life's in my throat.

ONE: Then I'll slit your throat for you, bastard.

TWO: Have pity, my lord. Not a drop in my mouth since morning. Waited long at the well so that some kind soul might give me water. But nobody has pity for us. Didn't know what to do, so I came here. Even cats and dogs drink this water I thought…

ONE: Grown too smart, eh? Thrash him. Squeeze his water out.

TWO: I fall at your feet, my lord.

ONE: Don't touch me! Thrash the bastard.

TWO: No, no, my lord. I made a mistake. Please … oh god, save me … I'll die … help … help me someone please.

ONE: Let me see which man and his father comes to help you!

TWO: (*writhing in agony*)

Barren, without purushartha
This civilization
Lives in the famine of tradition
The earth too is cracked, mouth gaping
Soil won't let soil have
A sip of water!

◗

TWO: One village.

ONE: Long live!

TWO: One water-source.

ONE: Long live! One village, one water-source!

TWO: Long live, long live!

ONE: Why's all this 'long live' and 'down with' going on in our village?

TWO: You mean you don't know! Who's the police chief around here?

ONE: I'm the man.

TWO: You? Namaskar.

ONE: Ram-Ram!

TWO: So chief, you don't want to let the dalits live, eh?

ONE: What do you mean?

TWO: There's news of a thrashing because the river was polluted.

ONE: Really? Hasn't reached my ears.

TWO: It's in the papers. It's everywhere, and you don't know?

ONE: Who reads those papers of yours, mister? They don't even reach us here. How're we to know?

TWO: Okay. So who beat up Chokha Kamble?

ONE: When?

TWO: Six months ago.

ONE: So why bother now?

TWO: What did you think? Nobody would talk?

ONE: Look here. I know nothing about this.

TWO: You incited people and you don't know?

ONE: Why didn't they complain to the police?

TWO: Who threatened Kamble, 'We'll break your leg and rape your wife if you complain?'

ONE: That's a pack of lies. He talks against me but doesn't tell you who helps him with money and grain when he's down.

TWO: And beats him up in return.

ONE: I haven't beaten up anybody and I know nothing about this. Are we their enemies? We dammed the river because it goes dry in the summer. Should humans drink the water that cattle drink? All the villagers are not the same colour. There could be some madmen.

TWO: Should you be one of them? You're the chief. A member of the ruling party. You've let down your party. The opposition

has started a regular campaign to malign us. Our government is getting a bad name. Don't let it happen again. Settle the whole thing now, today.

ONE: He has bad-mouthed the village, insulted me. He must apologize first.

TWO: Are you in your right mind? Chief, I'm advising you because you're one of us. Do as I say and let them live.

ONE: Are we stopping them from living? But they must keep to their station.

TWO: What about their well … you've even…

ONE: Who's eaten it? It's right there, in its place.

TWO: But they aren't allowed to draw its water.

ONE: If they don't want to draw water we can't force them.

TWO: Okay. Let's get a communal water drawing programme organized today.

ONE: Alright. But there must be full coverage with photographs.

TWO: Oh yes … one village, one water-source…

ONE: Long live, long live!

TWO: One village…

ONE: Long live. One water-source…

TWO: Long live!

ONE: Minister!

TWO: Yes sir!

ONE: Are last week's newspaper cuttings ready?

TWO: Ready, sir!

ONE: Read them and tell us if there's something special we need to take note of.

TWO: Can I start, sir?

ONE: Stop wasting time with your meaningless chatter. My ears and eyes are already impatient.

TWO: Yes sir! Here it is. The Honourable Chief Minister 'Mister X' inaugurates an impressive dam project at dot-dot-dot

PHOTO … PHOTO…

ONE: Why are you yelling?

TWO: Your picture, sir. In the papers, on the occasion of the inauguration. (*Holds the paper out to him*)

ONE: That's something to yell about? Do I have a pair of scissors in my hand to cut the tape for the photographer to take a picture?

TWO: Habit, habit. Slaves of habit. Pardon my error, sir!

ONE: Pardoned!

TWO: The building of the dam will irrigate dot-dot-dot acres of land, produce dot-dot-dot thousand kilowatts of power, and turn night into dazzling day. Water will be supplied to dot-dot-dot thousand villages and many dot-dot-dots will be achieved on the road to progress.

ONE: Minister, what's this business of dots?

TWO: Business? No no. It's a riddle to cover India's welfare, like a riddle covers the Indian Penal Code.

ONE: I don't get it.

TWO: The entire existence of the project is contained in these dots.

ONE: You mean that's how the report's been printed in the newspapers? That's a gross abuse of press freedom. What will the public understand from this—balls?

TWO: You shouldn't think of the public. Balls is right. That's what the public gets with newspaper figures. So it forgets them and we forget them. That's what it amounts to. Dots.

ONE: Dot-dot, Minister.

TWO: A dalit from dot-dot village in dot-dot block in dot-dot taluk in dot-dot district was beaten close to death by the police chief for polluting the river.

ONE: Read that last.

TWO: How can I break the protocol sir?

ONE: Okay. Make a full statement.

TWO: Yes sir. The story, which occurred six months ago, was

broken by a daily newspaper called *Revolution*. This was followed as usual by a downpour of memoranda of protest. Morchas were also taken out. Finally, peace was made with a communal water-drawing programme.

ONE: Peace? Who brought that about?

TWO: A special representative was sent.

ONE: And yet the credit goes to the 'one village, one water-source' people.

TWO: But you adopted them, didn't you?

ONE: Oh alright. So now there's peace everywhere in our kingdom! What's that noise outside?

TWO: I'll check, sir! (*Goes up to the wing and returns*)

TWO: My lord, give me justice. Give me justice.

ONE: Who are you? Why are you here? There is a mechanism for justice in our kingdom.

TWO: There's no saviour for the poor and the oppressed, my lord.

ONE: Oh! The poor and the oppressed? Oh yes, the poor and the oppressed. What's your complaint?

TWO: Where does water come from, my lord?

ONE: Are you mad? It comes from taps! We've spent lakhs building dams, laid miles and miles of pipes so water can gush into every home. And you ask me where water comes from?

TWO: I'm not talking of the city. I'm talking of the village.

ONE: Yes, talk. Talk on. I'll listen to everything. That's what people have voted us in for—to listen to the people.

TWO: Water comes from clouds, flows down rivers and streams. They flow into the sea. That goes up as steam, then clouds, then water from clouds. So who owns that water?

ONE: Just because I said talk, you're letting your tongue run away with you. Just state your complaint.

TWO: We don't have water to drink. The city folk come and take our pictures. The village folk come and break our pots and throw them out. How are we to live, my lord?

ONE: Your sorrow is our sorrow. I sympathize. You are from dot-dot village. Our kingdom is a just kingdom. Not a place for cheats and charlatans. Don't you worry. We've made a note of your complaint. Submit a written statement, that's all. We've taken note.

TWO: (*handing over a statement*) Please, my lord.

ONE: (*glancing over it*) It's a written one, I hope. Right. Now go. We've taken note. (*TWO goes as far as the wings*) Anyone there? (*TWO comes back*)

TWO: Yes sir!

ONE: What's the punishment for breaking the law against untouchability?

TWO: The amended one?

ONE: Something that will put the fear of god into them. It brought tears to my eyes to listen to that poor brother's tale. Is that how human beings treat other human beings? Even animals drink from the same waterhole.

TWO: Sir, a politician should not gush like water in an irrigation canal. It goes down as a black mark on the reputation of the politician. Even a dog doesn't look at him then.

ONE: So what should we do?

TWO: Dig a well for the untouchables and solve the problem.

ONE: Will that solve the problem of untouchability?

TWO: Don't get embroiled in that question. Treat it as a religious matter and forget about it.

ONE: We've heard that a separate well was dug for the dalits.

TWO: It was. But after last year's drought, the unscheduleds have grabbed it. The dalits must be assured of the government's sympathy. So this is the only way to do it.

ONE: I see. Well, we've taken note of it. Send that poor brother's statement to press and ours along with it. Make sure the report about the well goes in bold.

TWO: This is how real politics triumphs. (*Tears up the statement*)

TWO: Bharat is my land
All my countrymen are my brothers
That's on every page of schoolbooks
And from Kashmir to Kanyakumari
ONE: Bharat, you are rotting with leprous casteism
You want the truth?
Your culture is rotten from the roots
Your history—
Call me a traitor if you wish—
TWO: —is a cattle-shed that breeds eunuchs.
Eunuchs! Throw away those yokes
Laid upon you through centuries
Live like sky-soaring birds.
Why tread the barren path
Born of putrefied minds?
ONE: Why must we alone tread that path?
Why is our life a stagnant puddle?
Why are we without movement?
Who decided our status?
What? Even our shadows pollute?
Can it be true that the universal soul is one?
TWO: Colourless,
Odourless,
Tasteless,
Without character or form—
That soul is free.
Then who bound ours?
How did it get enchained?
How can it be a soul
That does not challenge slavery?
ONE: Why not kill the soul that kills humanity
And free yourselves?
The will is the way to freedom.
A strong wrist is the way to freedom.

The will is strong
Don't let the will's flag fall
Don't be the killers of your own freedom.
Die but don't trample on the history of free man.

TWO: The spirit crushed under the yoke will be free
And death will salute the will of millions of people.

ONE: Victory to revolution!

TWO: Victory to revolution!

ONE: The slogans of revolution have made revolution barren, a hollow bamboo.

TWO: Nowhere else on the face of this earth has revolution acquired such an ugly meaning.

ONE: Revolution happens when you pick up the child of a mahar. Let people die thirsting for a sip of water; but revolution happens when you give water to a donkey.

TWO: Shambuka is beheaded for learning the vedas; but a four-legged buffalo becomes a revolutionary for doing the same.

ONE: Such sterile notions of revolution are pushing the country to its ruin.

TWO: And so…

ONE and TWO: Victory to total revolution! Victory to total revolution!

TWO: In dot-dot village…

ONE: Of dot-dot block…

TWO: Of dot-dot taluk…

ONE: Of dot-dot district…

ONE and TWO: Atrocities! Atrocities!

ONE: Murderous assault by upper-caste villagers on satyagrahis drawing water from a well!

TWO: Among the satyagrahis were several women—

ONE: Attempt to outrage the modesty of women—

TWO: Dalits offered strong resistance to assault—

ONE: One died, two were hurt.

TWO: Even Bhausaheb was hurt.

ONE: Police numbers inadequate.

TWO: Atmosphere continues to be tense.

◗

ONE: Long live Bhausaheb!

TWO: Who are you?

ONE: I'm the rural correspondent of the *Revolution*. We'd like to have an exclusive…

TWO: I possess nothing exclusive.

ONE: That's your modesty. It is many years since the dalits have found a new and powerful leadership. They have been greatly harmed due to a lack of leaders. I believe they will make up for that harm now.

TWO: How?

ONE: For all you know, you may be responsible for changing the very face of this country in the days to come.

TWO: I am a believer in action. Has there not been enough speechmaking till now? I detest masks and I am not about to wear one myself.

ONE: What do you think the government should do?

TWO: They should look at this problem as a social problem and lay stress on action. They must not think of dalits as puppets to be used during elections. If that happens, the dalits will be disillusioned and might even turn traitors.

ONE: Anything more?

TWO: For the moment, no.

ONE: Thank you.

◗

ONE: Come in, do come in, Bhausaheb. I have been anxiously waiting for this meeting.

TWO: You embarrass me.

ONE: We are fully aware of your strength. And we acknowledge it. (*Holds out a purse*)

TWO: What is this?

ONE: Your security against hunger and loss of life. Two lakhs.

TWO: So I should withdraw my agitation?

ONE: Not exactly. It is our desire that both your leadership and our kingship should be safeguarded. We will be with you in your every problem; on occasion we might even choose to honour you with… (TWO *accepts the purse.* ONE *smiles in victory.*)

ONE: Victory to Bhausaheb!

TWO: Victory to Mister Minister!

◗

ONE: How much longer are we going to drink from that stream?

TWO: I don't understand anything. It's been six months since we started digging the well, but Bhausaheb's not come this way even once, nor did he send a word. Summer will soon be on us. The well was dug a man-and-a-half deep when we hit stone and work stopped. That's alright. But shouldn't he ask how far we've got?

ONE: And here we've gone and fought with the village folk. Lost lives, shed blood, all for no reason. When summer comes we'll be footing it all over the village again begging, 'Please, someone give us water', 'Please, someone give us water', 'Please, someone give us water'.

(*While voices repeat 'Please, someone give us water'* ONE *and* TWO *are seen leaving.*)

This barren soil has littered a thousand times.
This civilization
Lives in the famine of tradition
The earth too is cracked, mouth gaping
Soil won't let soil have
A sip of water!

(*The curtain comes down to the refrain of* 'A sip of water', 'A sip of water'.)

Kirwant

translated by

M.D. Hatkanangalekar

To the wise crows
who, wary of the craftiness of human beings,
refuse to touch the pinda

A Note

The mind whirls in a vortex of questions. How is it that in the seven-hundred-year-old tradition of Marathi literature, no attention has been directed to the kirwants who perform cremation rites? Has no death taken place in their homes? Is it not surprising? How can one explain this mystery?

Premanand Gajvee

Scene One

(*Bapu Thorat's house. He has died. His funeral procession moves along to the accompaniment of tal and mrudang.* DEVRAO *heads the procession with a clay pot containing fire.*)

Born on the earth
Death is inevitable
So do not grieve
For life.

Each one gives his shoulder
To the lifeless body
Carrying it
To the place of cremation.

The essence of life
Is burnt out
In the flames.
The umbilical cord
Severed for good.

This soul
Pined for love.
Now, while it prepares to leave,
Do not pity it.

(*The procession arrives at the crematorium. The bier is lowered. Deep silence. Suddenly* DEVRAO *bursts out in a heartrending wail: 'Bapu!'*)

SIDDHESHWAR: You shouldn't do this here, Devrao. This is the gateway to heaven. You should bid farewell with joy. Wipe

away your tears. Choose the site for the pyre. Arrange it the way you like. (DEVRAO *continues to sob.* TATYA *consoles him.*)

GANU: Oh no! Kirwant, he is distraught. How can he choose the right place? Come here. Look, this seems good enough.

SIDDHESHWAR: Devrao, will this do? (DEVRAO *nods.* SIDDHESHWAR *touches the spot and begins chanting.*) Hey brahaganaspati soma, pratyaya tujha samarthacha ey i kaatarata bhakta. O Soma, this manifestation of your power comes to your devotees with great pain. (*To* GANU) Get up. You have to pile up the logs. (*Some people start arranging the logs on the pyre.* SIDDHESHWAR *pulls at his upper garment, as if it were the sacred thread, and chants mantras.*) Accept this last rite of … Bapu Thorat's dead body, who belonged to the Bharadwaj clan, for its termination.

(GANU *seems bored while the others are busy fanning the embers taken from the clay pot and arranging the pyre.*)

GANU: I'll be back in a moment.

RAGHU: What's the matter? Are you bored?

GANU: No, I'll just have a quick smoke. (*Walks up to* SHINDE) Smoking all by yourself, eh? Why don't you offer me one? (SHINDE *offers him a bidi.* GANU *lights it and takes a long puff.*) It's good, Bapu is finally free. This dog's life—just isn't worth it, I tell you.

SHINDE: None of us can escape suffering.

GANU: I've decided, Shinde. With the falling of my first tooth, I'll take poison. This kind of suffering is not for me. Bapu amassed a good deal of money, but then…

SHINDE: He had to suffer a lot, like a husband with two wives. Devrao wanted Khemrao to take care of everything, and Khemrao wanted Devrao to do it. Two boys in disagreement, and Bapu caught in the middle.

GANU: Old age is truly pitiable.

(RAGHU *comes over and joins the conversation.*)

RAGHU: Shinde, when do you propose to get your son married? When he's past his prime?

SHINDE: Any suitable girl around?

RAGHU: You've been looking for a girl for the last two years. Didn't you find one?

SHINDE: There are thousands all around, but none suitable.

RAGHU: What about Jagtap's daughter?

SHINDE: Her?

RAGHU: She is fair.

SHINDE: Have you seen her eyes? It's as if she looks at me and smiles at you!

RAGHU: So? How does it matter? She would suit your son quite well.

GANU: Why not? One lame, the other squint-eyed.

SHINDE: (*irritated*) Yes, my son is lame. But why should I get him married to a girl with a dominant Mars in her horoscope?

RAGHU: Mars? My god!

GANU: Frightened of Mars, Raghu? Is it a ghost or something?

SHINDE: The bridegroom dies if he marries a girl with a dominant Mars in her horoscope.

RAGHU: Frankly speaking, I prefer a ghost to Mars.

GANU: Who told you that the girl has Mars?

SHINDE: Dhabushastri.

GANU: He's a scoundrel. He gets the better of people, telling them all kinds of lies. Let me tell you Shinde, don't you believe him. Better consult Joshishastri. He will tell us the truth.

SHINDE: That kirwant? Are you out of your mind? An auspicious matter like marriage to be decided by a performer of the last rites?

GANU: Let me tell you, that Joshi kirwant is a hundred times better than that wicked Dhabushastri.

SHINDE: You've gone too far. I would much prefer my son to die a bachelor, understand! Keep this in mind! (*Pause*)

SIDDHESHWAR: The God of Death

Rules this space and water

Hie away, you spirits, from here,

The ancestors have descended.
Come along, Tatya, bring the body to the pyre.

TATYA: Ganu, get up and start.

(GANU, SHINDE *and* RAGHU *help to bring the body to the pyre. A loud cry of 'Shri Ram Jay Ram' is heard as the body is placed upon the pyre. They perform the final rites of putting water in the mouth of the dead body, and the rest of the rituals.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Oh, dead, I fill the space with these offerings to protect the body from fire. (*To the relatives of the dead*) Now arrange the logs on the body. (*They begin to do so.*)

TATYA: Ganu, place the big log on the chest … yes, like that.

SIDDHESHWAR: Lord Yama, protector of the dead
Preserve this dead body,
I am sending this far away,
Up to you, Agni, you devourer of flesh
Through Yama.
Devrao, now get up and light the pyre. (DEVRAO *gets up to light the pyre, sobbing.*) Light the pyre at the head.

GANU: Kirwant, why not start with the legs?

SIDDHESHWAR: That is done for women.

GANU: Suppose we light it at the legs, what will happen?

SIDDHESHWAR: Don't disturb me with your pointless prattle.

GANU: Fine, but a woman's dead body is to be lit from the legs because she is supposed to rest at the feet of her lord.

(DEVRAO *lights the pyre at the head.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Let fragrant winds blow
Let mind, skin, limbs, flesh and bones—
Gain solace in heaven.
Let Bapu attain eternal bliss.

(*The pyre flares up gradually. Someone keeps pouring kerosene on the pyre.*)

GANU: That's it. Now the pyre is crackling with kerosene. Raghu, throw some salt into the fire. It'll crackle merrily.

TATYA: Wait for some time.

GANU: How long can we wait? It takes quite some time for the

head of a grown up person to crack on the pyre. Am I right, kirwant?

SIDDHESHWAR: Please don't interrupt. Let me go on with the mantras. If I miss something and the soul of the dead does not attain heaven, you'll blame me.

O God of Fire!

Do not burn this dead body askew

And scatter it away anywhere.

(*Enter* KHEMRAO, *hurriedly. Bursts out in a loud wail, and is about to jump into the pyre, when* SIDDHESHWAR *stops him.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Are you mad? How can you jump into the burning pyre? (*He pulls him away, warning the others.*) Will someone keep an eye on him?

TATYA: Too late, Khemrao. Kirwant, he is Devrao's younger brother. Lives in Bombay.

KHEMRAO: Tatya, I couldn't see Bapu!

SIDDHESHWAR: That can't be helped. The inevitable has happened. Is Bapu going to be restored to life if you jump into the pyre?

GANU: Man loses his balance if he is overcome with grief.

(*Looking at the pyre,* KHEMRAO *weeps bitterly.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Please stop weeping. Remember, no person on earth has ever escaped death.

KHEMRAO: All this is common knowledge, but you surely could have waited for me.

DEVRAO: There is a limit to waiting. Should we have waited till the body began to stink?

KHEMRAO: Even then, you could have remembered the custom.

I was denied even a last glimpse of Bapu's face!

TATYA: We did write to you about his illness, didn't we?

KHEMRAO: But that was two months ago. You should have known that it is difficult in my job to get leave so easily. You should have written to me again when Bapu was taken seriously ill. Then I could have met him while he was still alive.

GANU: That's true, but how could anyone know that the end would come so suddenly?

KHEMRAO: Bapu, forgive me that I couldn't pay homage. (*Pause.* KHEMRAO *goes near* DEVRAO.) Where's the gold bracelet that Bapu had?

DEVRAO: Bracelet? What bracelet?

KHEMRAO: The gold bracelet.

DEVRAO: I don't know anything about it.

KHEMRAO: Don't lie. It must be with you.

DEVRAO: Yes. And why not? I've looked after him, nursed him during his illness. He gave it to me.

KHEMRAO: But when I met him last, he told me I could have it.

DEVRAO: You want to pick a fight, do you? I won't give it to you. What will you do?

TATYA: Have both of you lost your minds? The person burning on the pyre now, burnt himself out for you while he was alive. Allow him to burn peacefully for the last time. Take up your property squabble when you reach home.

KHEMRAO: He didn't inform me because he feared that while Bapu was alive, he would give the ten-tola bracelet to me. Will you hand it over or not?

TATYA: I know you're dying for it. Bapu had been my friend since childhood. He always said that Devrao and Khemrao were a pair of divine brothers, like Ram and Lakshman.

GANU: What a fine pair! Simply wonderful!

TATYA: Bapu, how unfortunate you are. Your sons are fighting at your funeral pyre. You made a fortune and now your sons quarrel over it.

KHEMRAO: Are you giving me the bracelet or not?

DEVRAO: No. No. No.

(*The head on the pyre cracks.*)

TATYA: Seems the skull has cracked.

GANU: Yes, it is the skull. It has broken early because of this quarrel between the brothers. Let's go.

SIDDHESHWAR: Wait a little. (*He makes a hole with a small stone in the earthen pot, places it on his shoulder and makes three rounds around the pyre, then breaks the pot on the stone and hands the stone over to* DEVRAO.) Hmm, this is the asma. Bapu's life is preserved in it. Keep it carefully. When all the rites are over, it is to be offered to the river Ganga. (DEVRAO *ties the stone in his handkerchief.*) It's time for your last leave-taking. (*People circle the pyre, with folded hands, as* SIDDHESHWAR *chants mantras.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Let fragrant winds blow
Mind, limbs, skin, flesh, bones
Get happiness and attain heaven
Let Bapu get eternal bliss.

(*Darkness*)

Scene Two

(SIDDHESHWAR'S *house. About half past nine in the morning.* MADHU *is seen studying on the verandah. He is wearing khaki shorts, a white short-sleeved shirt and a black cap on his head.*)

MADHU: Dnyaneshwar was a brahmin by birth, but he was declared an outcaste by the brahmin society of his times because he was the son of a sanyasi, a mendicant. (*Stands up and starts reading again.*) And yet, (*moving around*) he was not deterred. The knowledge that the traditionalists had locked up in Sanskrit texts, he rendered into Marathi and made available to everyone in society. For this purpose, he composed a great treatise called Dnyaneshwari.
He is present in all living things.
Hatred is unknown to him.
He doesn't make distinctions.
Truly he is like the prime spirit.

(*Enter* DHABUSHASTRI, *dressed in expensive traditional robes, headgear and footwear, carrying a folded almanac in his hands.* MADHU *continues to read.*)

One who is present in all living things and does not know hatred...

DHABU: Well, well, very fine! Reading Dnyaneshwari, are you?

MADHU: Yes, learning it by heart. (*Resumes reading*)

DHABU: Go ahead and learn it by heart but you cannot make a living out of Dnyaneshwari. For that you have to learn how to perform the last rites. (MADHU *is indifferent.*) Where is your father?

MADHU: Ah, yes. He is in. Baba! (*He calls out and resumes his reading.*)

Follow the best, avoid the worst.

Ignore distinction as Mother Earth does.

(*Enter* SIDDHESHWAR. *He wears a dhoti, an upper garment, and the holy thread; he is sporting a knotted tuft on his bald head.* MADHU *continues reading.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Is it you Dhabushastri? All well, I hope?

DHABU: With you around, how can things be alright? Something odd has to happen.

SIDDHESHWAR: You go ahead, I'll follow.

DHABU: It's nothing of that kind. For sure you won't allow me any peace or happiness. (MADHU *closes the book and puts it in the school bag.*)

MADHU: Baba, I'm off to school.

SIDDHESHWAR: Okay. (MADHU *leaves*)

DHABU: Which class is your Madhu in?

SIDDHESHWAR: In the fourth standard.

DHABU: You must be planning to send him to the English school later? As a matter of fact, you must. You did not complete schooling yourself. Your brother Vasudeo has not completed his education either. He is engaged unnecessarily in some kind of 'All Hindus are One' movement. Conducts a shakha on behalf of some association, an association of brahmins. I have heard that they want everyone to be members of that association. They're out to destroy our dharma. The brahmins themselves have abandoned their own. But let that

be. Why should I worry? I'm just a poor priest, eking out a living by reciting the almanac and accepting the offerings due to a priest. But let me tell you the truth. Your brother Vasudeo is out to destroy our dharma. Giving up the work of the last rites for the deceased, working for groups and moving around with sticks. Is it in the interest of the brahmins? Think for yourself. Suppose tomorrow you stop working as the priest of the last rites and start conducting daily worship, read scriptures, predict the future, would you have preserved your dharma or lost it? Tell me? Can I perform last rites just because it pays more? Oh god, I can never accept it. The very thought is appalling!

SIDDHESHWAR: What does this mean? Why are you telling me all this?

DHABU: It is all futile, like pouring water on an upturned pot. So here is the matter: I examined the horoscope of Jagtap's daughter. There is Mars in her horoscope. I prescribed ways of averting its evil influence, but you came in the way.

SIDDHESHWAR: But I found no Mars in her horoscope.

DHABU: That's it. One brahmin deprives the other in this way. You are a kirwant. Why should you dabble in auspicious matters like marriage?

SIDDHESHWAR: But suppose someone comes to consult me, how can I say no?

DHABU: That someone may be ignorant, but aren't you wise? Aren't you a brahmin? According to our religious scriptures, performing the last rites earns the highest merit. Suppose I start doing your work tomorrow? Would you not blame me for acting against dharma? If you don't keep to the ways laid down by the scriptures, in the next birth you're destined to land yourself in hell.

(*Enter* VASUDEO, *dressed in khaki shorts and a short-sleeved shirt. He wears a black cap, canvas boots, and carries a stick. He is a smart young man of about twenty-five.*)

VASUDEO: Which hell are you talking about, Dhabushastri? The hell around us or the hell underneath? There's no dearth of people sending others to hell by their lies. They're making hell out of this earth.

DHABU: Vasudeva, you're going too far.

VASUDEO: I wasn't speaking about you.

DHABU: About whom, then? It is because of me that people know what is auspicious and what is not.

VASUDEO: That is true enough. Well, what does your brahmin dharma say?

DHABU: That's enough. This is called rubbing salt into the wound. We belong to the brahmin creed—and what about you? Are you not a brahmin too? But then, you are out to drown it in the depths of the ocean. The common people are floundering and we cannot suffer the sight. But what can we do? We are forbidden to enter your camp.

VASUDEO: Shastriji, you must be out of your mind. We welcome even untouchables and cobblers. And you happen to be regular brahmins!

DHABU: Because the untouchables and the cobblers are admitted, we desist from coming there, because we do not want to annihilate our dharma. That is…

VASUDEO: I see! So you're in charge of the 'Protect the Cows' association.

DHABU: Oh no! Not me! The leaders are Digambarpant and Vedantashastri.

VASUDEO: But you support them.

DHABU: Look here, Vasudeva. I agree with their views. If I happen to agree with yours, I'll naturally support you. You fail to recognize the essence of brahminism.

VASUDEO: Where does it lie? In the tuft of your hair? In the sacred thread round your neck? In the pugree?

DHABU: Reform your own house first; remove the tuft from your brother's head.

SIDDHESHWAR: I am not prepared to give up my dharma and go to hell, Dhabushastri.

DHABU: Did you hear that? You have grown hair on your head but what about the sacred thread? Have you thrown it away? Tell me.

VASUDEO: I did try that once, but they thought me mad.

DHABU: It's always like this. If you welcome it, you are bitten; if you let it go, it runs away from you. That is the reason why we hold fast to tradition.

VASUDEO: And yet, times are changing.

DHABU: That is why you have to hold fast to tradition.

VASUDEO: In spite of all their efforts, the reign of the Peshwas came to an end.

DHABU: Well, Vasudeva, that's exactly what we dream for—the return of Peshwa rule!

VASUDEO: This means that you would burn women on the pyre again?

DHABU: A sacrifice by the wife, for her husband. Even today our women worship sati. They even go on pilgrimages. That is how it is. The brahmin dharma will not perish.

VASUDEO: You are not one to accept defeat easily.

DHABU: It's not a question of defeat or victory. It's a question of preserving your identity, but you are dead against this worldview. This Keshav Abhyankar has lost his head. He is collecting all the castes in the sangh but let him know that brahminism shall not succumb so easily. (*Walks out*)

VASUDEO: These people will never be reformed.

SIDDHESHWAR: That you have reformed yourself is quite enough. It's been almost a week since Ratnagirikar sent word. But you refuse to say anything.

VASUDEO: About what?

SIDDHESHWAR: They were asking, how long should they keep their daughter unmarried?

VASUDEO: Daughter? Whose daughter?

SIDDHESHWAR: What's the matter with you, Vasudeva? Lovely as a star. Don't you know Madhu's aunt?

VASUDEO: Yes, of course. I know. She is quite beautiful.

SIDDHESHWAR: Then should I inform them?

VASUDEO: No. I don't want to marry.

SIDDHESHWAR: Do you wish to remain unmarried forever, then? People won't blame you, but they'll certainly blame me, as if I was not interested in getting you married. As an elder brother, I have to take care of you as your father would.

VASUDEO: Did I ever deny this?

SIDDHESHWAR: Then why do you say that you don't want to marry?

VASUDEO: I don't want to marry a girl from a kirwant family.

SIDDHESHWAR: Are you thinking of marrying outside our caste?

VASUDEO: Yes. Or else I would prefer to die as a munja, who has only had his thread ceremony. (*He walks into the house.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: What did you say? (*Speechless, he merely stares after him. He is at a loss for words. The stage darkens.*)

Scene Three

(*Morning. Twittering of birds.* REVATI, *an attractive woman dressed in the traditional nine-yard sari, hair neatly arranged in a large bun, is drawing decorative patterns in the yard.* VASUDEO *is about to leave. He has a staff in his hand.*)

VASUDEO: Vahini, I'm off to the shakha. (REVATI *gives him a bright smile.* VASUDEO *smiles back. When the pattern is complete, she starts preparing for the morning sandhya. Lays out the wooden seat and the various copper vessels for worship. Enter* SIDDHESHWAR. *He has a knotted tuft, and is wearing a silk dhoti. He sits down facing east.* MADHU *comes and sits next to him for the puja.* REVATI *goes in.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: (*Takes a little water on his palm moulded like a leaf with* MADHU *doing likewise.*) Keshavaya namah ... Narayanaya namah ... Madhavaya namah ... (*Drinks the water without*

making a sound and repeats the action.) Govindaya namah ... (*Washes his hands, then touches his ear with his right thumb*) Vaishnavey namah, Madhusudanaya namah...

(*Enter* VASUDEO)

VASUDEO: Bhau, I want to talk to you.

SIDDHESHWAR: Trivikramaya namah...

MADHU: Kaka's here.

SIDDHESHWAR: Madhu, you are not supposed to talk while doing sandhya. Vamanaya namah...

VASUDEO: I have to talk to you. Right away. Do you hear me?

(*Enter* REVATI)

REVATI: Bhauji, you?

VASUDEO: Yes, me.

REVATI: Why're you so upset? You went to the shakha, didn't you?

VASUDEO: Yes, but I returned halfway.

REVATI: Yes?

VASUDEO: Vahini, don't you know anything?

REVATI: About what?

VASUDEO: Madhu, go in.

MADHU: What about my sandhya?

VASUDEO: I want to talk to your father.

REVATI: What's so urgent?

VASUDEO: Vahini, take Madhu in. (REVATI *takes* MADHU *into the house, but stands listening at the door.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Achyutaya namah, Janardanaya namah...

VASUDEO: Stop this nonsense.

SIDDHESHWAR: Come back when I finish my sandhya.

VASUDEO: What sandhya? You don't know how to pass your time, and pretend to do sandhya.

SIDDHESHWAR: Vasudeva!

VASUDEO: You think that you perform sandhya according to the brahmin dharma? But people know you as a brahmin meant to perform last rites. Brahmin by birth but by profession a

lowly and despicable kirwant. Your presence is unwelcome on auspicious occasions, just like the presence of untouchables. Do you have any place at all within your creed? Have you forgotten what happened just yesterday when prasad was being distributed at the Satyanarayan mahapuja? You were refused the prasad and unceremoniously dismissed by Digambarshastri. You walked away meekly without uttering a word.

SIDDHESHWAR: Digambarshastri? I don't follow what you are babbling about!

VASUDEO: Well, well, it is I who is babbling, is it? Do you mean that you did not go to the mahapuja?

SIDDHESHWAR: No, I didn't.

VASUDEO: And yet Digambarshastri resoundingly announced that Siddheshwarshastri Joshi should walk away from the puja.

SIDDHESHWAR: Who told you all this?

VASUDEO: The wind in the street! It's all over the locality. How could you stand this humiliation?

SIDDHESHWAR: Do you mean to say that I should have fought with him there?

VASUDEO: Of course! You should have demanded an explanation.

SIDDHESHWAR: I don't have that much strength.

VASUDEO: This is not a matter of strength, it is a matter of conscience. You don't have that at all. There's no difference between you and a corpse in a crematorium.

SIDDHESHWAR: All I know is that I should act according to the code laid out by my dharma.

VASUDEO: As a matter of fact, as per the code, you shouldn't have gone there.

SIDDHESHWAR: That was perhaps a mistake, but our religion regards the priest who performs the last rites as the greatest and the holiest of the brahmins.

VASUDEO: Oh, you? The holiest of priests! When you were being insulted, even the God of Truth did not stand by you.

SIDDHESHWAR: Why are you tormenting me? Should I neglect my duty and incur the sin of disgracing my forefathers by disobeying them? I shall not do it as long as I am alive. Whenever I as much as think of abandoning my religious duty, I get nightmares and experience the stranglehold of death. I feel I have been flung into a cauldron of boiling oil.

VASUDEO: You're just a petty little worm all tied up in the strange knots of religion.

REVATI: (*comes out, confronting him angrily*) I've been listening to you for quite some time now. You've been talking of the corpse in the crematorium, of petty worms. Perhaps you've forgotten who you're talking to. Is that the way you talk to your elder brother? At least have some respect for his age.

VASUDEO: Vahini, you won't understand.

REVATI: How can I? Have I got ears? And a brain? I don't attend the shakha to learn scholarly things.

VASUDEO: Vahini, it was a public ceremonial worship organized by the association of brahmins. And yet, he was driven out in the presence of the full assembly. I'll never forget this humiliation.

(REVATI *stands, helpless.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: God will punish them for their sins.

VASUDEO: Did you hear that, Vahini? 'God will punish them'—he says. God helps only those who are strong. He is present in the strength of our wrists.

SIDDHESHWAR: I don't wish to argue any further.

VASUDEO: Come with me.

SIDDHESHWAR: Where?

VASUDEO: To demand an explanation for the humiliation heaped on you. You were driven out of the Satyanarayan mahapuja. I want the very same puja performed by you.

SIDDHESHWAR: Vasudeva, that's enough. I don't want to invite trouble.

VASUDEO: Are you coming with me or not?

SIDDHESHWAR: No.

REVATI: But I say—

SIDDHESHWAR: Just don't say anything. I cannot behave like him.

VASUDEO: Okay. But I cannot forget your humiliation. (*Walks out in a huff.* SIDDHESHWAR *rushes after him.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Vasudeva! Arrey Vasu…

(*Enter* DAYARAM. *He is wearing a dhoti, a short vest and a holy mark on his forehead—a pensive look on his face.*)

VASUDEO: Look! A customer, Siddheshwar Joshi Kirwant! Rush to the crematorium and start muttering the mantra of death: 'Let fragrant winds blow … mind, limbs, skin, flesh, bones…'

SIDDHESHWAR: Say something decent at least, for a change. What will he think?

VASUDEO: Something decent must happen first, in order for me to say decent things, and yes—if people didn't pop off, how would you earn a living? How would you support your family? Your god cares so much for you and your survival! He kills people so that you can give them salvation. Siddheshwar Joshi, kirwant, is truly the saviour of men. Shame on you! (*Exit*)

SIDDHESHWAR: You may speak now. Don't mind him.

DAYARAM: There has been a death in my family.

SIDDHESHWAR: I guessed it must be so as soon as I saw you. It is by the grace of god. He likes good men, whom he draws to his fold. Have you informed your relations?

DAYARAM: I have.

SIDDHESHWAR: Look here, Dayaram, maintain piety around the dead body; don't indulge in loud lamentation. If the death has taken place some time ago…

DAYARAM: It only happened early this morning.

SIDDHESHWAR: Smear the body with ghee so that it doesn't go stiff. It is bound to get late by the time all your kin arrive. Burn sandalwood sticks. The rites will be performed in the burning ghat, won't they?

DAYARAM: Yes.

SIDDHESHWAR: Very well. You go ahead. I shall follow.

(DAYARAM *goes away. Darkness spreads and an abhanga is heard.*)

Born on the earth
Death is inevitable
So do not grieve
For life.

(*Darkness*)

Scene Four

(DIGAMBARSHASTRI'S *mansion. He is at puja. He is about fifty, wears a silk dhoti.*)

DIGAMBAR: Morning and evening
I worship you
Oh Lord, grant me your love,
Grant me happiness and freedom from sin!
You create happiness,
Grant us the boon of food and clothing
Grant us knowledge of ourselves,
And let our mind and heart be pure.
Burn away all our sins! (*Places his right leg on his left knee, places his left palm upturned on his right knee and covers it with his right hand.*)
Oh Goddess Earth
You bear humanity
And you are borne by Vishnu
Bear me in the same manner
Make pure this asana
You, with eyes askance and overflowing tresses
It is flesh and blood
That you feast on.

(*Enter* DHABUSHASTRI)

O Chamunda, unvanquished,
Rest on the tip of my tuft.

DHABU: O Digambarpant Bendeshastri, Goddess Chamunda is unvanquished but you should take care of the knot of your tuft. Mind well, that Chamunda will not stay for long on the tip of your tuft. This I'm sure about.

DIGAMBAR: If there are obstacles due to my past deeds
By the command of Shiva
Let spirits and ghosts disappear
Now I start the highest ceremonial act—the brahmakarma.

DHABU: Brahmakarma—my foot! You might say the beginning of the end.

DIGAMBAR: What are you babbling about?

DHABU: Babbling? That Vasudeo, brother of Siddheshwar Kirwant, unmarried munja, a blot on the brahmin caste, was trying to locate you yesterday.

DIGAMBAR: Me? Why?

DHABU: Because you drove away his brother from the Satya-narayan mahapuja. He demanded an explanation.

DIGAMBAR: So?

DHABU: I told him that if you want justice, you should first meet Vedantashastri.

DIGAMBAR: Asked him to meet Vedantashastri? Why?

DHABU: You ask why? Because he is the only person who knows the scriptures and religion. He is known and respected as the shastri of shastris.

DIGAMBAR: Knowledge, honour and justice are all different categories. It is one thing to explain the essence of religion and quite another to draw out a plan of social life. Don't tax your brain. You won't understand this.

DHABU: Why? Am I not a shastri too?

DIGAMBAR: You and a shastri? (*Laughs*)

DHABU: Laugh if you like, but I am also known as 'Dhabushastri, the honoured Jyotishalankar'. I too am famous. I say, if there is a blot on the science of astrology, it is only I—Dhabushastri—who will remove it.

DIGAMBAR: Meaning?

DHABU: To predict the future is no joke. Understand?

DIGAMBAR: What future have you predicted?

DHABU: Do you wish to test me? You may well do that. You probably know Sawant, who lives near the stonewalled temple. He said, to me, 'Shastribuwa' in an afflicted tone as if he had lost his father…

DIGAMBAR: Let that be, Shastribuwa. (*He rises from his sandhya, takes out a piece of paper from his upper garment and hands it over to* DHABUSHASTRI.) This is a horoscope. A challenge to the science of astrology. Can you tell me whose horoscope this is?

DHABU: But there are no details—no name, place or time of birth on this paper!

DIGAMBAR: That is exactly what you have to find out. You can look into the future. Can you not unravel this horoscope? Chaps like you glibly announce that someone has Mars in his horoscope, or that Saturn proves an obstruction, and this day is not auspicious and things like that. You have not only defiled the scriptures, but also done away with the brahminical code of conduct, and its way of life.

DHABU: How have we defiled anything? We are merely doing what our forefathers have done.

DIGAMBAR: But our forefathers were not doing anything false or untrue.

DHABU: I'm not sure whether our ancestors refrained from doing anything false, or whether the people were totally ignorant.

(*Enter* VASUDEO. *He walks up a step.*)

VASUDEO: Ram-Ram, Shastriji!

DIGAMBAR: First step down and then say whatever you have to.

DHABU: Digambarpant! Vasudeva, can you not see that Digambarpant is dressed for puja?

DIGAMBAR: I do not wish to pollute my house with your presence. Step down.

VASUDEO: I never enter a house that worms from hell inhabit. I

came here because Vedantashastri asked me to see you.

(DIGAMBARSHASTRI *and* DHABUSHASTRI *exchange glances.*)

DHABU: You've come—fine. But why curse? You should know that you cannot claim the same standing as Digambarpant.

VASUDEO: My practice is to pay a person in his own coin.

DIGAMBAR: Just get out. This very instant.

VASUDEO: I haven't come here to get out. I've come here to demand an explanation. Why was my brother insulted at the Satyanarayan puja?

DIGAMBAR: If Siddheshwar thinks he has been insulted, he should come here himself. And even that is unnecessary. No sensible person would make friends with a kirwant.

VASUDEO: Watch your words.

DIGAMBAR: If I call a kirwant a kirwant, what's wrong with that?

VASUDEO: Just repeat those words and I swear…

DIGAMBAR: What will you do? (*Rushes towards* VASUDEO, *but is restrained by* DHABU.)

DHABU: Forget it. Don't carry it further. And Vasudeva, why are you bent on picking a fight? You say you've been sent by Vedantashastri. Then the final decision will be given only when he meets us.

VASUDEO: If Digambarshastri were to possess half your understanding, I wouldn't need to twist my tongue. I'll go, but mind you, you are dealing with me.

DHABU: O! I get it. You want justice, isn't it?

VASUDEO: I want it resolved today. I'll be here this evening.

DHABU: Do come, but not like that, in a mortal hurry. This is a matter of religion. Give us some time to—deliberate, that is. (VASUDEO *stares at* DHABU.) Come with a free mind and we will sort out the matter. (VASUDEO *leaves.*)

DIGAMBAR: Called me a worm from hell, did he?

DHABU: Yes, something of that sort.

DIGAMBAR: I will show him who that worm from hell is!

(*Darkness*)

Scene Five

(SIDDHESHWAR'S *house. About ten o'clock in the morning. Enter* DHABUSHASTRI)

DHABU: Anyone home?

SIDDHESHWAR: (*peeps out from behind the door*) You go ahead, I'll follow.

DHABU: For what? To carry my dead body? There is still time for that, you bastard.

SIDDHESHWAR: (*comes out*) Don't get angry with me, Shastribuwa.

DHABU: Why shouldn't I be angry when you already think of me as a corpse. Think of your brother's corpse first.

SIDDHESHWAR: What has Vasudeo done?

DHABU: Pretend ignorance, feign madness! Didn't you feel bad because you were driven out of the Satyanarayan mahapuja?

SIDDHESHWAR: How does it matter? My feeling bad or good?

DHABU: If that is true, why does your brother not understand this? Instead of following the path of religion, he goes about railing at everything. Why can't he marry and settle down?

SIDDHESHWAR: You've struck the right chord. I tried to make him see reason, but…

DHABU: Why did you give up?

SIDDHESHWAR: What should I say … we're not getting a suitable match.

DHABU: Why? Didn't you get one for yourself?

SIDDHESHWAR: My case was different. He doesn't want a kirwant girl.

DHABU: Then does he want a girl from the family of Brahmadeo? Isn't he ashamed of himself? And he has the audacity to say that we are a blot on the brahmin community. Tell him to behave himself hereafter. Goes about cursing all and sundry.

SIDDHESHWAR: Did he curse you?

DHABU: Not me, but he used all kinds of objectionable words with Digambarshastri.

SIDDHESHWAR: What did he say?

DHABU: Said he was a worm from hell.

SIDDHESHWAR: Really? Good that you informed me. I am grateful to you. Kindly be seated and have a cup of tea.

DHABU: Yeah, oh yes, no objection. (*About to sit down, but then rises immediately*) Oh dear! I totally forgot. Today happens to be Sankashti, the fast of Lord Ganesh!

SIDDHESHWAR: Today? Not today. Sankashti is tomorrow.

DHABU: How can that be? It is today.

SIDDHESHWAR: I get it; you can't drink tea in a kirwant's home.

DHABU: No, no. Aren't you a human being too? Had I not been on a fast, I could have taken food as well. Even if you are a priest presiding over the last rites, you are a brahmin after all. I shall surely take tea one of these days. But take care of your brother. Cursing Digambarshastri was a little too much. See you later! (DHABUSHASTRI *walks out like a victorious hero.* REVATI *comes out immediately.*)

REVATI: Why did he come?

SIDDHESHWAR: Look here, you should not lose your temper.

REVATI: He spoke wildly and you merely listened. These people can do and say anything they want, and we are not to say a word?

SIDDHESHWAR: Is it any use quarrelling with them?

REVATI: Bhauji's right. There's hardly any difference between you and a corpse on the pyre these days. Don't you ever feel angry?

SIDDHESHWAR: You too have started speaking like Vasudeo—he has no sense of responsibility. Whirls about unrestrained like the wild wind. I cannot behave like him.

REVATI: But how long are we to lead this life of disgrace? I've been telling you that we should leave this village and shift to some town far away. You won't even agree to that.

SIDDHESHWAR: Have our ancestors amassed any fortune in some town?

REVATI: Maybe not, but we can at least live in peace. Here, one can't talk to anyone—there are no neighbours. It's so stifling! If it's a marriage, or name-giving ceremony, or sacred thread ceremony, no one wants us anywhere near them. But if someone dies, they come here for the last rites.

SIDDHESHWAR: Again you are talking just like Vasudeo.

REVATI: As if I have no brains of my own! Don't I want to be friends with other women? We should live in the locality of the untouchables rather than amongst brahmins.

SIDDHESHWAR: Where should we move, leaving this area? This house, though dilapidated, has been handed down to us by our forefathers. Revati, we should accept our lot and the responsibility assigned to us. God is not oblivious. He keeps a watchful eye over everything.

REVATI: We may forget our plight, but we should think at least of Madhu's future. Or is even that to be neglected?

SIDDHESHWAR: He is a boy. Still in school.

REVATI: We should give him a good education. Only then will he get a good job and then perhaps this disgraceful kirwant's life would…

SIDDHESHWAR: You mean he would give up his family duty?

REVATI: Hasn't your brother done so?

SIDDHESHWAR: Don't even mention him.

REVATI: Why?

SIDDHESHWAR: Each one has his own god-given duty, his own temperament. Everyone lives according to his nature and dharma. Abiding by another's dharma can prove disastrous. Understand?

REVATI: If necessary, even a cat changes its nature and catches whatever it finds.

SIDDHESHWAR: I'm not a cat.

REVATI: But I do know that there are a good many rats in this world who are afraid of their own shadow.

SIDDHESHWAR: Watch it, Revati. Everyone tries to teach me

wisdom. Go away. Don't stand before me. (REVATI *starts sobbing and dabs her eyes with her pallu.*) I'm not dead yet.

(*She goes in.* SIDDHESHWAR *begins to pace up and down in an uneasy manner, lost in his thoughts. Enter* TATYA *and* GANU)

TATYA: Oh, kirwant!

SIDDHESHWAR: (*depressed*) What is it? (TATYA *and* GANU *are a bit puzzled.*)

TATYA: You see, it's like this. Ganu, let's proceed. (*Both prepare to leave*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Ok, you go ahead, I'll follow.

TATYA: Nothing of the kind. We just dropped in.

SIDDHESHWAR: Oh! Just dropped in?

GANU: I had to talk to you.

SIDDHESHWAR: Go ahead. (SIDDHESHWAR *sits down.* TATYA *and* GANU *also sit.*)

TATYA: You performed the last rites for Bapu. But the crow didn't touch the pinda offered as part of the ritual to the dead Bapu. Not a good omen.

SIDDHESHWAR: That happens sometimes. You were present at the ceremony, weren't you? Devrao and Khemrao both promised that they would not fight over the gold bracelet, and agreed to divide the land properly. Also promised to keep up friendly relations with all the relatives, to fulfil all hopes and aspirations of Bapu—and even then the crow did not touch the ritual pinda. What could I do? So I was forced to make a grass crow.

GANU: But why should the crow not touch it?

SIDDHESHWAR: How can I give you an exact reason?

TATYA: I have a suspicion. Bapu had wanted liquor and chicken some days before his death. But he was taken ill and his desire remained unfulfilled.

SIDDHESHWAR: Why didn't you tell me this at the time of the ceremony?

TATYA: Slipped my mind. I've been wondering, why wouldn't

the crow touch the pinda, and then it suddenly struck me.

SIDDHESHWAR: But what can we do about it now?

GANU: The five pindas that you had prepared had the shape (*whispers*) of a woman's breast, which remind one of milk. And let me tell you in private, once when we had made tea with milk at home, Bapu wouldn't drink it even when coaxed and cajoled … said, if he took that tea, he would throw up. To each his own, but milk was Bapu's only diet—his pathya—throughout his illness. No wonder the crow did not touch the pinda!

(VASUDEO *comes in and sits quietly in a corner. He has a worried expression on his face.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Your doubts and conjectures are all very well, but I only followed what is laid down in the religious texts.

GANU: Had you not shaped them like that, the crow might have touched them.

SIDDHESHWAR: Are you suggesting that I should have bypassed the rules?

GANU: What if there's an obstacle like this?

VASUDEO: What can my brother do about it?

GANU: Who else can? (VASUDEO *comes nearer*)

VASUDEO: Go and ask that Ram of yours.

GANU: What's the connection between the pinda and Shri Ram?

VASUDEO: Shall I tell them, Siddheshwara?

SIDDHESHWAR: Dhabushastri came here.

VASUDEO: Oh, did that bastard come here? A pack of scoundrels—all of them. 'You want justice, right? We will do it.' And now no one shows his face. If I don't teach them a lesson, I'll forfeit my name.

SIDDHESHWAR: Your actions shouldn't cause me trouble. That's all.

VASUDEO: I'll see who causes trouble!

SIDDHESHWAR: I'll handle things.

VASUDEO: That Dhabu must have poured things in your ears.

GANU: I'd like to say something. Don't take it otherwise. Whatever you might say, that Dhabushastri is a thorough blackguard. Cannot wish anyone well. Made a false prediction that Jagtap's daughter's horoscope was ruled by Mars.

VASUDEO: Despite that you people run after him.

GANU: How can we help it? And who is interested in inviting trouble? No one can escape the duties of religion, or the distinctions of caste. However much you rub coal, it'll remain black. Let's go, Tatya.

TATYA: What we came here for hasn't been done. Vasudeva, you were telling me something about Shri Ram.

VASUDEO: Oh! It was nothing, Tatya.

GANU: How come? If you don't want to tell us, it's all right.

VASUDEO: You seem to be a little angry with me. Have you ever been to Nasik, Ganu Kaka?

GANU: Sure! I went there once during the Kumbhmela.

VASUDEO: Then you must have seen the river Godavari.

GANU: What a question! Godavari is heaven on earth.

VASUDEO: The very same Godavari, with her water—calm, quiet, crystal clear—was flowing by. A gandharva spied a beautiful maiden walking by the riverbank. Enamoured by her radiant beauty, he wondered, 'What is such a beautiful creature doing there? She should be in my bedchamber.' Now if this thought didn't promptly materialize into action, what kind of a gandharva would he be, anyway? So, in that instant, he took on the guise of a crow, and flying very low, approached her, and pecked at her breast. The woman was caught unawares. She didn't know what to do. And the gandharva, in the guise of the crow, would not let her proceed. So the woman started praying to Ram. Ram, immersed in his puja, suddenly became aware that someone was desperately praying for help. He was beside himself with anger. If he were to kill the crow, he would be afflicted with the sin of murder while doing puja. If he were to let it go, then

it would amount to a failure in his duty. What could he do? At last he decided. He picked up a piece of sacred grass from his puja offerings, charmed it with a mantra, and flung it at the crow. One eye of the crow was immediately gouged out. The gandharva in his agony realized that he had trespassed his limits. The terrible knowledge dawned on him. This was none other than Sita, Ram's wife. Mortified, he started praying to Ram for forgiveness. Ram, answering his prayers, replied, 'O gandharva, you'll live like a crow and survive on filthy and rotten food thrown onto the garbage heap. People will despise you. As soon as they see you, they'll drive you away.' The gandharva started weeping bitterly. Ram reassured him. He said, 'Once people die, their kin will beg you to touch the pinda. Because, unless you touch it, the soul of the dead won't be freed from its earthly fetters.'

GANU: Oh my god! Is this the account, then? I always used to wonder, Tatya, why we require a crow to touch the pinda! But tell me, why do they shape the pinda like a woman's breast?

VASUDEO: The crow had pecked the breast of Sita, so they make the pinda of that shape, and because she was fair, they make it out of boiled rice.

GANU: Rice pinda? But they made it out of dough.

VASUDEO: If the deceased happens to be a brahmin, it is made of rice, otherwise of dough.

GANU: Oh hell! That's the secret, is it? But why do they put curd on the pinda?

VASUDEO: Why do women use face powder?

GANU: Because they wish to look fairer.

VASUDEO: It's the same principle here. Because of the curd, the pinda seems full of milk and the crow instantly pounces upon it.

GANU: If that's the case, I can confidently say that it would never touch the pinda meant for Bapu, because Bapu hated milk. Naturally the crow wouldn't touch it.

VASUDEO: But the crow made of sacred grass touched it.

TATYA: But if the real crow had touched it instead, my friend's soul would have been liberated.

VASUDEO: Now will you listen to me? Just as your Bapu died, you will also die. When a person dies, he is no more. What salvation and heaven do you speak of? There are people dying all over—not all of them make an offering. Do the Christians do it? Do the Muslims? These are strange practices started by the priestly class so that they could make a comfortable living without working for it: in order for your forefathers to attain heaven, you must present footwear and umbrellas to brahmins. Who uses them? Do your forefathers use them? If the crow touches it, or a pig, what difference does it make? Thanks to your forefathers, my brother gets two meals a day. That is the truth. The rest is all lies. Blatant lies.

(GANU *and* TATYA *are speechless. They depart.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Vasudeva, did you have to say all this?

VASUDEO: What is wrong with what I said? Ram had said to the crow that people would treat him with contempt, but call on him only when a person dies. Brother Siddheshwara, people treat you with contempt, but call you only when someone has died. You are a crow yourself. Instead of calling a crow to touch the pinda, why don't you swallow it yourself? Your belly will be full and people will attain heaven.

(*Enter* DHABUSHASTRI)

DHABU: Siddheshwara, Vedantashastri's mother has breathed her last.

SIDDHESHWAR: Go ahead, I'll follow.

VASUDEO: Go and tell Vedantashastri that Siddheshwar will not come. You did not remember him when he was driven out of the Satyanarayan mahapuja. As long as you are indifferent to his humiliation, Siddheshwar will not come.

(DHABU *moves away*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Wait, Dhabushastri.

VASUDEO: No, you will not. You cannot go.

SIDDHESHWAR: Look here, let me follow my code. I don't wish to wallow in hell after death. (SIDDHESHWAR *proceeds to leave but* VASUDEO *pulls him back.* DHABUSHASTRI *leaves.*)

VASUDEO: Seeing the craftiness of men, even the crow refuses to touch the ritual pinda—and you happen to be a human being... The crow is a hundred times better than you. If mother had given birth to a crow rather than you, I would have felt proud to call the crow my brother. But you?

SIDDHESHWAR: (*raises his hand to strike him*) Vasudeva! You villain!

VASUDEO: Why did you stop? Go ahead and hit me. (REVATI *rushes out.*) Behave as an elder brother should.

REVATI: Bhauji, why are you behaving in such a peculiar way?

VASUDEO: Because I'm a villain. I'm wicked. I do not care for his prestige, do I? What if he is humiliated? (*Pause*) You're hurt because of me, aren't you? I shall never come between you and your dharma. (*Goes away in desperation*)

REVATI: Go after him! Stop him.

SIDDHESHWAR: Let him go, blacken his face.

VASUDEO: Remember, I shall never set foot in here again.

REVATI: Bhauji! He hasn't even eaten yet. (*To* SIDDHESHWAR) Are you his brother or his enemy?'

SIDDHESHWAR: I am a crow, a crow!

(REVATI *looks on, helpless. The stage darkens slowly.*)

Scene Six

(SIDDHESHWAR'S *house. Evening.* SIDDHESHWAR *is sitting in the verandah. He is scratching his back.* GANU, TATYA *and* DEVRAO *walk in angrily.*)

DEVRAO: Where is that scoundrel Vasudeo?

SIDDHESHWAR: Why? What happened?

DEVRAO: Call that bastard out. A mere kirwant, and such conceit!

SIDDHESHWAR: Devrao, won't you tell me what's wrong?

DEVRAO: Don't you know? That scoundrel says that a pig should have the ritual offering for Bapu!

GANU: He should be beaten black and blue.

SIDDHESHWAR: There seems to be some misunderstanding.

GANU: Misunderstanding? We have misunderstood?! Do you hear Tatya, what this priest is saying? Who said that it does not matter much whether the pinda is touched by a crow or a pig?

SIDDHESHWAR: He did not mean it. It was not his intention to show disrespect to the dead.

DEVRAO: Call him out. I shall see what he has to say. (*Striking the ground with his stick*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Please don't quarrel.

DEVRAO: Are you calling him out, or should I go in?

SIDDHESHWAR: He is not home.

DEVRAO: Where is he?

SIDDHESHWAR: I don't know. Went out at noon and hasn't returned yet.

DEVRAO: If not today, I will catch him tomorrow. If I don't break his leg, I won't be called a Thorat.

SIDDHESHWAR: Look here, Devrao, I beg your forgiveness for whatever has happened. He has done wrong. I accept the responsibility.

DEVRAO: Why should you beg for forgiveness? You happen to be born brahmins, how can you ever go wrong? We made the mistake of calling you to perform the last rites.

GANU: He knows that he is the only kirwant in the village. Where else can people go? He knows it only too well. That explains the arrogance.

SIDDHESHWAR: It is not like that, Ganu. This concerns dharma. Our dharma.

GANU: Henceforth, we will not call this priest. It's better that our forefathers go to hell. Let's go.

SIDDHESHWAR: Please don't punish me for my brother's fault.

Please don't. Tatya, at least you should make him see reason.

TATYA: How should I? All this happened in your presence this afternoon. Your brother spoke about the pig touching the ritual offering. Yet you did not say a word—as if you had lost your tongue. He rushed at us, and yet you kept quiet. What you did for Bapu's dead body was no special favour. We too enjoy some social standing, you know!

DEVRAO: Are you priests that you should have a social standing? Let me meet that villain... (*They walk out.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Devrao... Oh god! What can Vasudeo gain by hurting people! If he continues to behave like this ... Oh god!

(*Enter* REVATI)

REVATI: What is the use of sitting like this? Bhauji walked out in the afternoon and hasn't returned yet. He hasn't even had his meal.

SIDDHESHWAR: Go, then, fetch him. Make him sit before you and feed him with your own hands.

REVATI: I know what you're really trying to say.

SIDDHESHWAR: Why don't you just shut up?

REVATI: Why are you cross?

SIDDHESHWAR: Don't you know? The whole world spits in my face. Aren't you pleased?

REVATI: What are you talking about? I was busy cooking. How could I hear anything with that noisy stove on?

SIDDHESHWAR: He makes things so difficult for me. Calling someone a worm from hell, saying that a pig should touch the ritual pinda. He has really caused me immeasurable pain—this Vasudeo. He is to do and say as he pleases—all at my expense. Devrao came with a group of people. Why should I accept all this? The matter has to be settled today. Once and for all.

REVATI: What can you gain by torturing yourself? Bhauji doesn't yet have any idea of life's responsibilities. Once he realizes this, you will find him completely changed. Once he gets married...

SIDDHESHWAR: In spite of your taking his side so consistently, do you think he'll marry your sister?

REVATI: Why shouldn't he? Is my sister not attractive? She is fair, well proportioned. She is one in a million—a radiant star.

SIDDHESHWAR: But he is as insensitive as a stone. To sustain a family is no joke—he doesn't earn a paisa. He'll bring a wife home and at the slightest tiff, he'll walk out on her. Where is she going to go looking for him?

REVATI: Don't think that I am forcing you to propose a match for my sister. There'll be ten families wanting her as their daughter-in-law.

SIDDHESHWAR: You'll never change. If I speak the truth, you get angry. No house is without strife. It is almost night and still no trace of him.

REVATI: You made a mistake. You shouldn't have raised your hand against him.

SIDDHESHWAR: Did he show me any respect? Even a stranger wouldn't have spoken the way he did. Called me a crow!

REVATI: You don't protest when other people insult you. You don't say a word. That's why he reacted so strongly. Don't take it otherwise. He is really good at heart. He does a lot for the house. Cares so much for Madhu. He is anxious that Madhu should progress in his studies. Teaches him. Go, look for him. He has been without food all day.

SIDDHESHWAR: And have I been feasting all day? I alone know what sorrow gnaws at my heart. The spectre of Vedantashastri's mother moves before me all the time, pleading for salvation. This is the first time I have shirked my responsibility. That too because of Vasudeo.

REVATI: What he did was for your own good. If you aren't treated like a human being, why should you waste your time thinking?

SIDDHESHWAR: I'm thinking of bliss after death. In the kingdom of god, I shall be amongst the sinners. Vultures will gnaw at

my flesh. No, Revati, I will not call back a person who has barred the way to heaven for me. And ask forgiveness of him? Revati, it doesn't make much of a difference to me whether he comes back or not.

REVATI: If this is the way you feel, get up, eat your food and go to sleep.

(SIDDHESHWAR *gets up and* REVATI *follows. Enter* MADHU)

MADHU: Aai…

SIDDHESHWAR: Where were you all this while?

MADHU: I had gone to a friend to get back a math notebook.

SIDDHESHWAR: You study with the help of your friend's notebooks?

MADHU: No. This is my notebook. (*He touches his leg.*)

REVATI: My Madhu is not a dunce.

SIDDHESHWAR: What is the name of your friend?

MADHU: Nanu. (*Puts the notebook in his satchel*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Nanu? You mean Narayanrao Tilak's son?

REVATI: Yes, he studies in the same class. His mother was also saying that he is weak at math.

MADHU: He always gets a big zero.

SIDDHESHWAR: (*putting his shirt on*) I'll be back soon.

REVATI: Where are you going now? Weren't you going to eat?

SIDDHESHWAR: If I eat without him, I won't rest in peace even in heaven. I shall have to bring back my brother, who has such a deep concern for my happiness. (*Moves away*)

REVATI: Just now you were … come back soon. Madhu, can I serve you food?

MADHU: I'm not hungry. (*Touches his leg again*)

REVATI: Why?

MADHU: I had something on my way back from school. Besides, I had tea at Nanu's place just now. (*Puts his hand on his leg again*)

REVATI: What is wrong with your leg? Let me see.

MADHU: No, nothing.

REVATI: What do you mean by nothing? It's swollen.

MADHU: Tea spilled on it.

(REVATI *brings medicine and applies it to the wound.*)

REVATI: You're always so clumsy. Can't you even drink tea properly?

MADHU: The cup had no handle and it burnt my hand. The cup slipped from my hand and tea spilled on my leg.

REVATI: These people don't even know how to serve tea to children. Do they use cups without handles?

MADHU: Only my cup was like that. I was about to refuse when Nanu's mother said, 'You are Nanu's friend. Take that cup from the niche over there.' I took the cup and his mother poured tea without touching it.

REVATI: Don't eat or drink anything anywhere, I'm warning you!

MADHU: But Aai, those are good people.

REVATI: You are still very young. How can you judge what is good and what is bad?

(KESHAV ABHYANKAR *steps in. He is a wearing a fine dhoti, shirt, black coat, moustache, black cap and thick Kolhapuris—altogether an imposing personality.*)

KESHAV: Vasudeva, oh Vasudeva…

REVATI: (*comes forward*) Who's there? Vasudeo is not at home.

KESHAV: You don't seem to recognize me.

REVATI: It seems I have seen you somewhere. Maybe at the thread ceremony of our Madhu last year.

(MADHU *goes and stands by his mother's side.*)

KESHAV: Yes. I am Keshav Abhyankar, Vasudeo's friend. And you're his sister-in-law, right?

MADHU: Right.

REVATI: Madhu!

KESHAV: The same boy. I had come for his thread ceremony.

REVATI: Please take a seat.

KESHAV: I'm in a hurry. For the last four–five days Vasudeo has not come to the shakha. I asked a few people, but no one gave me a proper answer. So I came myself. Has he gone out of town? Why are you looking so serious? Is anything the matter?

REVATI: Nothing...

KESHAV: Well, I've heard a little about it. I was surprised because you people never interfere with anybody's affairs. But to be insulted when the puja is being performed!

REVATI: Since then, the atmosphere at home has been much disturbed. The brothers are quarrelling. Vasudeo walked out in a huff this afternoon. Hasn't come back yet. Now his brother has gone out to look for him.

KESHAV: This Vasudeo is crazy. Does it help, getting wild like this?

REVATI: If you happen to be his friend, why don't you make him understand?

KESHAV: I've to get a suitable opportunity for that. Vasudeo, who is a fulltime worker of our organization, has fallen in love with a girl.

REVATI: Fallen in love?!

KESHAV: Well, I don't know for certain. But why should people talk unless there is some basis for it? Isn't that right? (REVATI'S *expression becomes even graver.*) Well, I'll take leave. Please don't forget to tell him that I had come here to meet him. I have some important matters to discuss. Okay then.

(KESHAV *leaves.* REVATI *and* MADHU *go in.* REVATI *shuts the door.* KESHAV *crosses* SIDDHESHWAR'S *yard and finds* DHABU *and* VEDANTA-SHASTRI *standing near a lamppost.* VEDANTASHASTRI *is in his traditional attire, about seventy years old, with a white moustache, sandalwood and white ash markings on his forehead.*)

KESHAV: You, Vedantashastri? Greetings! Enjoying yourself, eh?

DHABU: You haven't heard...

KESHAV: What is it?

DHABU: Bad news. Vedantashastri has lost his mother.

KESHAV: Sorry to hear that. Now you must be on your way to Siddheshwarshastri?

DHABU: Yes, but he is acting like a madman. He hasn't turned up even though a message has gone to him. This is how religion gets undermined.

KESHAV: You ill-treated him in the mahapuja, and now you expect him to respond to your call?

DHABU: Who else is there? Even a cornered god … it's good that we met. Please talk to Vasudeo and make him understand. He's a member of your group, isn't he?

KESHAV: But would he listen to me?

DHABU: Then don't say anything. All of you are out to see the destruction of dharma.

KESHAV: The essence of dharma is to mould a man—not to break him. I shall be present at the last rites ceremony. (*Exit*)

VEDANT: I think it's better to leave.

DHABU: Since we've come to the house, let's at least knock on the door. Let us try and make him understand.

VEDANT: What if he insults us?

DHABU: This is not an occasion to think about honour and dishonour. You should request Siddheshwar yourself. Let me tell you, Siddheshwar is a straightforward person; it's his brother who's the villain.

VEDANT: Suppose he stands in the way?

DHABU: Tell him, we'll do justice. Not only will Siddheshwar be entitled to perform the Satyanarayan mahapuja, we shall see to it that he does the puja of the entire pantheon.

VEDANT: Would Digambarshastri accept this? We are taking a decision without consulting him.

DHABU: Vedantashastri, this is a mere subterfuge. Once your mother's last rites are over … well…

VEDANT: But suppose he puts the condition of the worship first and then the last rites?

DHABU: 'If' this and 'if' that—too many ifs and buts. Come on. (*As they start walking*) I tell you, everything will be okay. You should take things in your stride. (*Approaching the door*) Siddheshwarshastri, oh Siddheshwarshastri! Are you asleep?

REVATI: (*opens the door*) You? Here again? Why are you howling? My son's asleep.

DHABU: Tell Siddheshwarshastri that we have come.

REVATI: For what? To accompany the corpse? Aren't you ashamed?

DHABU: Is that the way to talk! We are like your fathers.

REVATI: Do you really deserve that honour?

DHABU: Look here Revati, I too have a tongue in my mouth. (*Trembling all over with rage*) If I lose my cool…

VEDANT: Be quiet, Dhabushastri. I told you we should have turned back. Not only have you been insulted, thanks to you, so have I. That too by a woman—and a kirwant woman at that!

REVATI: Go, get away from here. (*Shuts the door*)

VEDANT: To tell you the truth, Dhabushastri, it is Digambarshastri who is responsible for all this. Vedantashastri to be insulted by a woman! How can I show my face to the world? (*Pause*) Dhabushastri, what will become of my mother now? (*Sobbing*) Oh, mother!

DHABU: (*consoles him by patting him on his shoulder*) Digambarshastri is the only one who can find a way out. Come, wipe away your tears. (*Exit*)

(*Darkness*)

Scene Seven

(DIGAMBARSHASTRI'S *mansion. Night.* DIGAMBARSHASTRI *is getting dressed when* DHABU *and* VEDANTASHASTRI *walk in.*)

DHABU: I guessed you would be home.

DIGAMBAR: Preparations done? Oh, Vedantashastri, you? Here? (VEDANTASHASTRI *sobs*) Your sorrow is indeed inconsolable. You've lost your mother's protection, but now you'll have to act with great patience.

DHABU: What should not have happened is precisely what has happened.

DIGAMBAR: Yes, death is always bad. But a life of ninety years cannot be said to be short. Besides, suffering on the deathbed

and then … it is better to die this way. Shall we go?

DHABU: The truth is, Digambarshastri…

DIGAMBAR: …It's good that you brought him here. He must have felt very uncomfortable in that atmosphere at home. I visited your house a while ago and heard that you and Dhabushastri had gone out. (DHABUSHASTRI *and* VEDANTASHASTRI *look at each other.*) Why are you standing? Kindly take a seat and for god's sake stop shedding tears.

VEDANT: What will be my mother's fate, Digambarshastri?

DIGAMBAR: Don't behave like a child. A brahmin woman goes to heaven. I don't have to tell you that!

DHABU: But for that one has to perform the last rites.

DIGAMBAR: So?

DHABU: Siddheshwar will not perform the last rites…

DIGAMBAR: Not perform the last rites? What are you saying? Why not? It is his duty.

DHABU: We are being paid back in our own coin.

DIGAMBAR: In our own coin?

DHABU: This is the aftermath of the incident at the Satyanarayan mahapuja. To be fair, Siddheshwar was about to step out to perform the last rites when Vasudeo stopped him.

DIGAMBAR: And you walked away meekly?

DHABU: What could I have done?

DIGAMBAR: You could have forcibly dragged him here.

DHABU: Who, me? We aren't exactly living under the Peshwas' regime, are we? Besides, with Vasudeo around, I didn't have the courage.

DIGAMBAR: If you gave your life for the cause of Hinduism, that would have been a grand gesture of sacrifice. All Hindus would have been proud of you.

VEDANT: Why are you wasting time in useless arguments when my mother's last rites are to be performed?

DIGAMBAR: Useless? You think our arguments are useless? I empathize with you; but you being so learned—with such

profound knowledge of the very essence of Vedanta—how can you fail to notice that your mother's last rites are merely an excuse. A kirwant is taking up an aggressive stand as a revenge for the insult meted out to him at the mahapuja—this is a question linked to the future of our tradition, religion and creed. Remember, Vedantashastri, a petty kirwant stands before us, presenting us with such an acute moral dilemma. We should stand together and face this challenge.

VEDANT: I fail to understand one thing though: when Siddheshwar had come there only for the prasad, why was he insulted and thrown out?

DIGAMBAR: Well, this is fine talk! It was you who brought the presence of Siddheshwar to my notice.

VEDANT: That was my duty; but I never thought that you would immediately throw him out.

DIGAMBAR: Who chanted the Gayatri mantra one hundred and eight times because of Siddheshwar's unholy presence at the auspicious place of worship? The place where Siddheshwar had taken his seat—who purified it by sprinkling cow-urine and smearing it with cow-dung? Who made all those who had seen him drink panchagavya? Today, because your mother has died and the problem of last rites has cropped up, you are taking this position. Whatever we did with Siddheshwar is consistent with the requirements of our religion.

DHABU: The essence of our religion is contained in curse and forgiveness. I feel that all this can be resolved by compromise.

DIGAMBAR: Dhabu, when will you stop being foolish? To beg forgiveness of a kirwant is conciliation of the most debased kind: 'See, we have gone wrong. Forgive us and agree to perform the last rites of Vedantashastri's mother.' With this kind of behaviour, we'll surely lose our honour. Some of our people, to speak plainly, men like Keshav Abhyankar, are crazy. With the slogan 'All Hindus are One' on their lips, they are befriending the cobblers and the untouchables. This

is patently against brahmin dharma. That is why we have dedicated ourselves to the Gauraksha Seva Sangh or the 'Cow Protection Association'.

VEDANT: I agree with all this Digambarshastri, but what about my mother's...

DIGAMBAR: We're talking precisely about that, Vedantashastri. Dhabushastri, you were saying that Siddheshwar was about to proceed, but Vasudeo stopped him.

DHABU: Yes.

DIGAMBAR: So our problem is Vasudeo and not Siddheshwar. First we have to deal effectively with Vasudeo.

VEDANT: Am I to allow my mother's body to rot until you come to a resolution? You are going off on a tangent!

DIGAMBAR: I am doing whatever I think is proper. It was a similar situation, perhaps more painful. Vedantashastri, I appeal to you to recall that incident which is inscribed in letters of gold: Once a brahmin boy, hale and hearty, suddenly died as he was playing. His parents were very distressed. Convinced that this could not have taken place unless there had been an act of sin, the brahmin decided to investigate the cause of his little boy's death. A low caste person was found doing penance in the forest. So the grieving brahmin went to the king, carrying the lifeless body of his son. Fortunate are the subjects who have a king of such merit! None other than Ram—who sent his pregnant wife into the forest because his subjects suspected her fidelity—destroyed at one stroke the low caste person who happened to have caused the death.

DHABU: That is ... you mean Vasudeo? No, Digambarpant. No.

DIGAMBAR: This is the only way to save the brahmin dharma.

DHABU: Should a brahmin kill another? That is a sin.

DIGAMBAR: It is not killing a brahmin, it is killing a kirwant, and a kirwant who has abandoned his duty—a responsibility handed down to him by his forefathers. He has not only abandoned it, but now openly denounces it, speaks of equal-

ity, and wants to marry into a non-kirwant family. Now about sin: according to our dharma shastra, it is no sin to kill a low caste person. The low caste and the kirwant have the same abominable status. There is no sin in killing a kirwant.

VEDANT: (*overwhelmed*) No, Digambarshastri, No! God! For what sin am I being punished this way? Oh god! What have I done that I cannot perform the last duties of a son for his mother—a mother who carried me within her for nine months and nine days, gave birth to me, brought me up, did so much for me day and night. I am a wretch and a sinner. Oh god, show me the path of light. Asatoma sadgamaya … tamasoma jyotirgamaya… O God, lead me from darkness to light. (*He breaks into a loud wail.* DHABU *tries to console him by placing a hand on his shoulder.* DIGAMBAR *stops him by making a sign. Silence for a moment, then with sudden determination*) Digambarshastri, my mind is made up. I don't need Siddheshwar or any other priest. I shall do the last rites of my mother, myself.

DIGAMBAR: Are you out of your mind, Vedantashastri? A Vedanta scholar like you, perform such a lowly job as the last rites? What will people say? Your reputation would…

VEDANT: No, it won't. After the last rites are over, I will chant the Gayatri mantra 1008 times and be pure again.

DIGAMBAR: You can say it any number of times, but people won't accept it. Once a woman has become a prostitute, she cannot regain her purity however hard she tries. You will find yourself in the same situation.

VEDANT: I will accept that. I want a place in the kingdom of heaven after my death and I shall get it by serving my mother.

DIGAMBAR: You may reach the doors of heaven by serving your mother, but a Vedapandit doing anteshthi, the last rites—you will neither be in heaven nor out of it. You will hang in a limbo like Trishanku. (*Pause*) Dhabushastri, you alone can rescue Vedantashastri.

DHABU: Who, me? Should I debase myself to the life of a

kirwant? Should I turn to the Garud Puran while my father is still alive and hasten his death? Should I suffer skin disease by performing last rites? I don't want my family line to be exterminated. I won't be able to bear my son being treated with contempt. I won't do this dastardly act even if you threaten to kill me.

DIGAMBAR: (*angrily*) Do you think then that I should do this rite? I requested you because Vedantashastri is at the top of our hierarchy. If we don't ensure his honour, who else will? (*Paces up and down, disturbed*) And now religion itself is in danger of crumbling to pieces.

VEDANT: Digambarshastri, I appreciate your distress, but Dhabushastri is not wrong; the basis of religion—you cannot raise it again—will never be the same. At this moment I shall stand by my religion. I shall do the last rites. If people think me base, let them. If they want to excommunicate me, let them. (*Gets up to go*)

DIGAMBAR: Vedantashastri, wait. I cannot allow that. We must excommunicate Siddheshwar's family who have refused to perform your mother's last rites. He cannot get a single opportunity to perform the last rites anymore.

VEDANT: But is this possible?

DIGAMBAR: Yes, it is possible. When he is threatened with hunger, he will come round and then that brother of his will come grovelling at our feet.

DHABU: Good, Digambarpant. Your decision would have pleased even the gods in heaven.

VEDANT: But what about the last rites of my mother?

DIGAMBAR: Don't worry. The last rites of your mother will be performed by Gokarnshastri Kirwant of Sawantwadi.

DHABU: Gokarnshastri of Sawantwadi? He deserves to be kicked in his hindquarters! This duty is a pious deed, but that blackguard doesn't enter the crematorium unless he is paid first.

DIGAMBAR: Look here, Dhabushastri, I know all that.

DHABU: And despite that…

DIGAMBAR: Yes … sometimes things are out of our control, Dhabushastri. Please let Gokarnshastri know that I have called him.

(DHABUSHASTRI *leaves*)

VEDANT: In the event of any crisis in religious matters I always give a ruling according to our sacred texts. And today when I am really in trouble, I remain 'Vedantashastri' merely in name. Digambarshastri, you are entitled to this honour. Only you. (*Salutes* DIGAMBARSHASTRI *with folded hands*)

(*Darkness*)

Scene Eight

(SIDDHESHWAR'S *house. He is mending his silk dhoti.* REVATI *walks up to him.*)

REVATI: This is beyond repair. Get a new one.

SIDDHESHWAR: Aren't you familiar with the state of affairs? We can't afford luxury. We have to pull through somehow. We could have earned something by performing the last rites of Vedantashastri's mother, but we were not fated to. They didn't suffer one bit… They brought a kirwant from outside—Gokarnshastri—and got the last rites of Vedantashastri's mother performed. No one suffered, Revati, except us.

REVATI: I agree, but why should you put up with insult without rhyme or reason? Come what may, our Madhu should be free from all this.

SIDDHESHWAR: I sometimes wonder what is in store for us.

REVATI: You worry a lot.

SIDDHESHWAR: How can I not worry, Revati? To eke out a living this way… Vasudeo doesn't understand … no support whatsoever. He doesn't want to live in peace and won't allow others to do so. He has to stop behaving like this.

REVATI: Everything will be sorted once he is married.

(VASUDEO *comes out, prepared to leave.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Where are you going?

VASUDEO: Why?

SIDDHESHWAR: I want a straight answer to my question. You are not to go out of the house.

VASUDEO: Not even to have some tea?

SIDDHESHWAR: Don't you get it at home?

VASUDEO: If I did, why would I go out?

REVATI: What did you say, Bhauji?

SIDDHESHWAR: Don't you give him tea?

REVATI: He's drunk tea twice since morning.

VASUDEO: Yes, but the cup had a handle.

SIDDHESHWAR: Handle! What is the problem now?

VASUDEO: Hereafter all of us must learn to drink tea from cups without handles.

SIDDHESHWAR: What are you talking about?

VASUDEO: Madhu was given tea at Tilak's house in a cup that was kept aside—a cup without a handle.

SIDDHESHWAR: What is Vasudeo talking about?

REVATI: I don't know.

VASUDEO: Lie if you must, but Madhu has made a clean breast of everything on his way to school. His leg was scalded. Don't you think that Madhu should at least be spared the humiliation that we suffer every day? Why did you allow him to visit Narayan Tilak's house in the first place?

SIDDHESHWAR: Whatever has happened has happened.

VASUDEO: You never feel sorry about anything.

SIDDHESHWAR: What is the use of feeling sorry? What can I do about it?

VASUDEO: Well, I can certainly do something. I'll teach that villain Tilak a resounding lesson. Gives this dirty treatment even to young boys?

SIDDHESHWAR: No more quarrels, I warn you. Inviting hostility from everyone. I appeal to you Vasudeva, let me lead my life

my way. I cannot stand your behaviour. If you wish to stay in this house, you…

VASUDEO: I didn't come back of my own accord.

SIDDHESHWAR: Why should you? Am I not still alive to rub my nose to the ground before you?

VASUDEO: Look here Bhau, if you are in trouble because of me, I am ready to leave this house this very minute.

REVATI: Did he say anything of the kind, Bhauji?

VASUDEO: Maybe not in so many words, but it meant the same.

REVATI: However hurt he is, he is to say nothing to you?

VASUDEO: Vahini?

REVATI: There's a limit to everything.

VASUDEO: You too…? Am I so heartless?

REVATI: No Bhauji, it's the circumstances. Put yourself in his place and then you'll understand.

VASUDEO: It's me who is foolish! I used to think that I had the support of my elder brother, the love of his wife, but no—one is always alone. If father were alive today, he wouldn't have thrown me to the winds.

SIDDHESHWAR: I still vividly remember his last moments. As he breathed his last, he asked me to take responsibility for you … you were hardly nine years old then. You didn't even see mother's face … she died giving birth to you … you were fated to be an orphan. But Vasudeva, I swear in Madhu's name, I'll never let you want for anything. What I ate, I gave you. (*Pause*) I had given my solemn word of honour to father that I would never send you away. I have only one thing to ask of you: relieve me from this one debt that I owe father. Get married, settle down, set up your own household.

VASUDEO: Bhau, I've conveyed my views on marriage to you long ago.

SIDDHESHWAR: That is not acceptable.

VASUDEO: In that case, it is not possible for me to marry. I shall never marry a kirwant girl. Never.

REVATI: You disgrace yourself by making such a statement.

VASUDEO: Yes, I am disgracing myself. What does a kirwant have to be proud of, or feel honourable about? I just can't stand anyone looking with contempt either at this house or anyone staying in this house. This too is the house of a chitpavan brahmin.

REVATI: But Bhauji, aren't kirwants under a curse?

VASUDEO: I want to annihilate that curse.

REVATI: If that happens, it is indeed welcome. I'm just an ordinary housewife, thinking of salt and pepper all the time—I cannot understand how you're going to remove this curse on all kirwants.

VASUDEO: How? Simple! The girl I marry won't be a kirwant girl.

REVATI: Okay, but what about you?

VASUDEO: What do you mean?

REVATI: What of your being a kirwant? What about the children born to you? Your children will bear your name. Because you are a kirwant, your children will always be considered kirwants.

VASUDEO: (*suddenly at a loss for words*) This … I … Vahini…

REVATI: Bhauji…

VASUDEO: I hadn't realized … I hadn't given any thought to it then … and now… (*He suddenly seems to have lost all his inner strength and conviction.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: What do you mean by 'then'?

REVATI: Bhauji, when you are in love, it is only love that matters. There is no thought dictating it. Don't be so emotional.

VASUDEO: What exactly do you want to say, Vahini?

REVATI: Love is blind—it doesn't think of consequences.

SIDDHESHWAR: Why are you speaking in riddles?

REVATI: Because Bhauji himself is a riddle.

VASUDEO: You will naturally find me a riddle, because I cannot marry your sister, Nalini. But Vahini, what about me? What about the girl whom I love more than my life?

REVATI: Bhauji, go ahead and marry that girl. I will not be annoyed. My sister Nalini is not exactly bereft of offers. I just wanted to know the truth. If you had told me that you were in love with a girl and hence couldn't marry Nalini—that would have been enough for me. But ignoring the facts about yourself and calling my sister the daughter of a kirwant, you unnecessarily made an issue out of it. (*Walks away in a huff*)

VASUDEO: Are you angry, Vahini?

(*She doesn't even look at him.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Now who's the girl for whose sake you've raised such a hullabaloo?

VASUDEO: What's the use, Bhau? I was thinking of flying high with pride and honour, but find my wings clipped. This life of a kirwant … were I to marry not only the daughter of a brahmin but the daughter of the king of gods, I wouldn't escape the disgrace of being a kirwant. There is only one solution, that is to see that all kirwants are left without issue—that the kirwant as a community is exterminated.

SIDDHESHWAR: Vasudeva!

VASUDEO: Today I have understood the reality of life. I did not understand what my Vahini, doing mundane household chores, could instinctively understand. This line of kirwants has to cease. Bhau, my decision is final. I shall not marry. Never.

(REVATI *comes out.*)

REVATI: Are you going to sit like this all day? Get up and go to the grocer. I have to start cooking! It's getting late. (SIDDHESHWAR *folds the dhoti he is mending and gets up.*) Get salt, cooking oil, tamarind (*hands over a bag and money*) and come back soon.

(SIDDHESHWAR *is about to proceed when* VASUDEO *takes the bag and the money from him.*)

VASUDEO: Bhau, you wait here. I'll go and get the things. (*Exit*)

REVATI: Will you inform my father, or should I do it myself? I think I'll have to do it.

SIDDHESHWAR: Let's not hurry. We have waited so long. Why not wait a few days more?

REVATI: How long can we keep her waiting? Why wait? We may lose a proposal.

SIDDHESHWAR: I think...

REVATI: Nothing doing, I shall inform them tomorrow about Vasudeo's decision.

SIDDHESHWAR: All right. Do whatever you think best.

(REVATI *walks into the kitchen.* SIDDHESHWAR *puts the sacred silken dhoti in its place.* DHABU *walks in.*)

DHABU: Is Siddheshwarshastri home?

SIDDHESHWAR: Oh, Dhabushastri?

DHABU: I wasn't sure if I'd meet you.

SIDDHESHWAR: Please take a seat. Anything in particular?

DHABU: Or else why should I come? I am confiding in you because we are close to each other. Vasudeo doesn't seem to be around.

SIDDHESHWAR: Gone out. Any work with him?

DHABU: What work can I have with him? He himself doesn't earn a thing—not even a couple of coins. Yet puts obstacles in the way of someone trying to earn a living. Well, could he stop the last rites of Vedantashastri's mother?

SIDDHESHWAR: That's a regret that will gnaw at my heart forever.

DHABU: You're a fool. You say this now because you were able to see reason, but does Vasudeo see it?

SIDDHESHWAR: Whatever was to happen, has happened.

DHABU: You will know what this means when you suffer the pangs of hunger. Now listen to me. It's not too late yet. Go—prostrate yourself before Digambarshastri. Ask for his forgiveness. You don't realize how much you've lost by not doing the last rites. On the occasion of his mother's shraddha, Vedantashastri is going to perform das-daan: seat, footwear, umbrella, gold ring, sacred thread, copper utensils, ghee, clothing—all these things, plus food and kitchenware. You've

been doing the last rites for such a long time now—did you ever earn so much from a single dead body? Gokarnshastri—that nobody—is going to reap a neat little harvest. All the brahmins will probably seek him out hereafter. What are you going to do? You will not only lose your income, but you'll be banished to the nether world after you die. Let me tell you, a strange thing happened that day—Vedantashastri's mother's head wouldn't split open on the burning pyre! The whole body was reduced to ashes, but the head wouldn't break!

SIDDHESHWAR: What? The head wouldn't break?

DHABU: How could it? By right, you should have performed the last rites: the soul of the dead would certainly have known this. The soul went up into the head, and then, naturally, it wouldn't break.

SIDDHESHWAR: That is why the image of the pious mother hovered before my eyes and begged for a pleasant passage into the next world. Dhabushastri, it was a great sin.

DHABU: I am really scared now. Vedantashastri's mother could not enjoy the peace of her last rites according to her wishes. So she will now become a witch and torment you. Not you alone, but the entire village.

SIDDHESHWAR: Oh god! For what sin are you punishing me like this?

DHABU: I think you should perform an atonement ritual and be rid of this mess. Prepare a doll of Vedantashastri's mother, go to the crematorium, perform the last rites by chanting the appropriate mantras, then leave and don't turn back even once—but you will have to make the doll out of gold.

SIDDHESHWAR: Gold?

DHABU: I tell you for your own good. It has been declared by none other than Vedantashastri himself.

SIDDHESHWAR: A gold doll? When I find it so difficult to make ends meet?

DHABU: Then suffer the consequences. Actually, Vedantashastri

had strictly warned me not to talk about this. To you or anybody else. But I've told you. Doesn't matter. To err is human. I told you this, because I feel for you. I'll take leave now. (*Exit*)

SIDDHESHWAR: (*talking to himself*) Retribution. That I have to accept. Or else Vedantashastri's mother will become a witch, join the ghosts and pester me.

REVATI: (*coming out*) Oh, you!

SIDDHESHWAR (*suddenly pulls himself together*): What is it?

REVATI: How come Vasudeo isn't back yet?

SIDDHESHWAR: I don't know.

(DAYARAM *comes running in*)

DAYARAM: Kirwant, kirwant, come and rescue your brother. People are beating him up.

REVATI: Oh god!

SIDDHESHWAR: Who's beating my Vasudeo?

DAYARAM: Devrao and Ganu. There was an argument over the pinda. Vasudeo came to the grocer's shop. The grocer refused to serve him. Vasudeo wanted to know the reason. The grocer said, 'If I were to serve a kirwant, the other brahmins would boycott my shop.' Devrao and Ganu were passing by. They came up and charged him: 'Why did you speak about a pig touching Bapu's pinda?' Vasudeo was trying to reason with them, but the situation got out of hand. Devrao hit Vasudeo with a stick. His head is bleeding. Now rush.

(SIDDHESHWAR *runs out.* REVATI *stands confused. The stage darkens.*)

Scene Nine

(SIDDHESHWAR'S *house. Midnight. Quiet.* SIDDHESHWAR *is dreaming. Notes of a sitar and the tinkle of anklets.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: This rhythm enthralls me. Here, these ravishing maidens who would put apsaras to shame with their ketaki-soft complexions... Oh! This is Rambha, and that is Urvashi. And between the two, Menaka herself! Menaka, with her

unbelievable, bewitching beauty … waiting for me with a garland. Yes! Her eyes speak! And all the gods in heaven, Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh, and the king of the gods—Indra—all stand reverentially in their places to welcome me … I who am the most righteous in the three worlds… Me alone… Me, Siddheshwarshastri Joshi. Gods in heaven, I am truly indebted to you for all the honour. I humbly bow to you. (*The music of the sitar and the anklets rises in volume.*) Rambha, riding on this rhythmic tide, takes my hand in hers and leads me to my seat. Urvashi, with a sculpted pose is asking me to take my seat. Menaka, with her heavenly smile and eternal youth, offers me a garland of flowers, approaching me with beautiful steps. She is offering the garland to me with her slender ketaki-soft hands. These hands… (*The shriek of a witch*) Oh, oh, oh… (SIDDHESHWAR *lets out a frightened cry.* REVATI *wakes up, and so does* MADHU.)

REVATI: What happened? What's wrong? (*Lights the lamp*)

SIDDHESHWAR: (*talking in his sleep*) Leave me … let go … leave me alone … my throat!

REVATI: Madhu, go—wake up your uncle. (MADHU *rushes to the verandah.*)

MADHU: Kaka! Kaka!!

(VASUDEO *gets up. His head is swathed in bandages.* VASUDEO *and* MADHU *enter hurriedly.*) Baba!

VASUDEO: Vahini, throw some water on his face first. (REVATI *splashes water from the pot.*) Must have had a bad dream.

(SIDDHESHWAR *regains consciousness, but is still very frightened.*)

REVATI: What happened?

SIDDHESHWAR: That witch, Vedantashastri's mother … gripping my throat… No, I must accept the terms for the atonement. Yes … must accept … at whatever cost.

(VASUDEO *and* REVATI *are bewildered.* MADHU, *frightened, goes to* VASUDEO *for protection. The stage gradually darkens.*)

Scene Ten

(DIGAMBARSHASTRI'S *mansion. Dawn. He is worshipping the rising sun, chanting mantras and telling his beads.*)

DIGAMBAR: The worshipper—I… Bless me, stand by me… Lend me protection… One who chants the Gayatri mantra… you protect him, O Goddess… In this world the sun god … promotes religious belief … supreme radiance.

(*When the round is complete, he does the suryanamaskar. He folds his hands and resumes telling the beads. Takes water in his mouth and turns in.*

Enter SIDDHESHWAR. *He is wearing a shirt and dhoti, with a black cap on his head, misery written all over his face. He is about to call out, but waits near the steps. A thought flits across his mind as he remembers the words of* DHABUSHASTRI, *'Go and prostrate yourself before* DIGAMBARSHASTRI *and ask for his forgiveness.'*

DIGAMBAR *comes to take away the asana—the seat arranged for worship—looks at* SIDDHESHWAR *waiting at the steps and pretends that he has not noticed him. Clears his throat and comes near the steps to spit; tries to spit on* SIDDHESHWAR *but he has moved away, and* DIGAMBAR *now spits in another direction.*)

DIGAMBAR: (*sarcastically*) Oh, you! Welcome, welcome, Siddheshwarshastri, born in a chitpavan brahmin family. We extend welcome to you in all possible ways. Why did you wait at the steps of our house? Come, come up, this way. (*Withdraws some distance from the steps, places his seat and sits on it.*) Come Siddheshwarshastri, sit close to us.

SIDDHESHWAR: Please don't put me to shame by such words.

DIGAMBAR: Shame and you?

SIDDHESHWAR: I am being consumed by the fire of anxiety from within.

DIGAMBAR: You? Consumed and burnt? What a strange thing! You burn others on the pyre.

SIDDHESHWAR: Please don't harass a poor person like me any more.

DIGAMBAR: You call yourself poor? You are a person of high religious merit. Income from death anniversaries must be considerable. In the name of ancestors, you devour everything. Now let that be. How is it that you remembered us all of a sudden?

SIDDHESHWAR: You know everything.

DIGAMBAR: Do I? About what?

SIDDHESHWAR: For the last four days I haven't known what to eat … we've had to go without food. The grocer is not prepared to give us even salt or oil on credit. Yesterday we had to take some boiled nachani leaves, that too without salt. If you stop my work, Shastriji, how can I survive? Don't be so cruel.

DIGAMBAR: I'm a mere worm from hell. What can I do, Siddheshwarshastri Joshi?

SIDDHESHWAR: I shall prostrate myself before you, if you so desire.

DIGAMBAR: That you may do a thousand times, you may even rub your nose to the ground before me, but that won't change me. I shall remain a worm in hell.

SIDDHESHWAR: Take pity, Shastriji!

DIGAMBAR: Get away from here, you villain. You carcass-worshipper, aren't you ashamed to ask for forgiveness? When your brother condemned me as a worm of the netherworld, did you blacken your face in shame? Went to the length of insulting even Vedantashastri! Such bloated pride! You will not get a place even in hell, you carcass-worshipper. Do you understand what I say? Who has lost his dharma now? You were making a peaceful living doing the last rites, and your brother created all kinds of obstacles for you. Said he wanted justice for your being driven from the Satyanarayan mahapuja. (*Chuckles cruelly*) Justice? We'll give you all the justice you want. All the dead of the whole world will come to your house, but on one condition.

SIDDHESHWAR: I shall do whatever you say.

DIGAMBAR: As per your deed in your past lives, you've obtained the job of the last rites worship. Right? (SIDDHESHWAR *nods*

in assent.) Your son too in due course … but instead of teaching him last rites worship, you have put him in a normal academic school? Isn't that so? You must be ashamed. And that villainous brother of yours attends an association that proclaims 'All Hindus are One'. Why? You blackguards, you have brought dharma to the point of destruction. In future, you must not do anything that goes against dharma. Go. Get lost. (DIGAMBAR *gets up, lifts his asana and goes in.* SIDDHESHWAR *stands, rooted to the spot, thinking to himself.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: If I wish to live in peace, I must do all this. I have to withdraw Madhu from school and teach him how to attend to the last rites. Madhu is my son. He will obey. But Vasudeo—he will never listen. He would not allow Madhu… Oh god, what should I do?

DIGAMBAR: (*reappears*) Why villain? You still here?

SIDDHESHWAR: I shall manage Madhu, but I don't think Vasudeo will accept my words.

DIGAMBAR: You take your decision.

SIDDHESHWAR: I am at loss…

DIGAMBAR: At the moment, this is the only way out, as I see it.

SIDDHESHWAR: Tell me what I should do.

DIGAMBAR: Because you have acted according to the dharma, you will get the highest place in heaven. Now go back in peace.

SIDDHESHWAR: But what do I do?

DIGAMBAR: Kill. Kill Vasudeo.

SIDDHESHWAR: What did you say? Kill Vasudeo?

DIGAMBAR: Yes, that is the only way out.

SIDDHESHWAR: Oh, god!

DIGAMBAR: Accept this as god's wish. Go.

SIDDHESHWAR: You dirty worm from the deepest pit of hell, that's the reason why god has made sure you're alone. First your wife died of asthma, then your son wasted away with TB. You too will die with worms in your body. No one will touch your corpse.

DIGAMBAR: (*wild with rage, rushes towards* SIDDHESHWAR) You come to my house and abuse me? (*Kicks* SIDDHESHWAR *viciously. He falls on the steps.*) You! Enemy of our religion, you will not get a place even in hell. (*Turns and leaves*)

SIDDHESHWAR: No! (*Shrieks of a witch resonate in his ears*) I shall accept punishment but never kill my brother. Never. (DIGAMBAR'S *words ring in his ears and pester him… 'That is the only way out. Kill. Kill Vasudeo.'*) But he is my brother. (*The voice now becomes unbearably loud. 'Kill, Kill Vasudeo.'* SIDDHESHWAR'S *confusion mounts. He is now thoroughly bewildered. The stage darkens slowly.*)

Scene Eleven

(SIDDHESHWAR'S *house. Morning.* VASUDEO *on the verandah, anxious* MADHU, *on his way to school, comes near* VASUDEO.)

MADHU: Kaka, tell me something.

VASUDEO: Yes?

MADHU: What is this Garud Puran?

VASUDEO: Small children should not be curious about such things. They should study. Go, go to school.

MADHU: Study? What's the use of study? It doesn't fill your stomach. If you have to fill your stomach, you have to learn Garud Puran.

VASUDEO: Garud Puran? Who told you this?

MADHU: You know that Dhabushastri? He said it. He met me near the school yesterday. Said…

VASUDEO: Look here Madhu, you shouldn't pay attention to him.

MADHU: But Kaka, what is this Garud Puran?

VASUDEO: Don't ask me such useless questions.

MADHU: You are the one who's always telling me that I should always ask about whatever I don't understand. One mustn't be ignorant. And now you say that I should not ask useless questions? Kaka, is Garud Puran useless?

VASUDEO: Madhu, you are too young to understand these things.

MADHU: But what is Garud Puran?

VASUDEO: It deals with the death of man, that is birth, death, heaven, hell, the last rites and all that your father does.

MADHU: Now I understand. 'You go ahead, I'll follow.' I had once said to father, 'Shall I attend "You go ahead and I'll follow"?' He got very angry with me, and said, 'This is no business for small children.'

VASUDEO: Madhu, the cremation ground is bad. You can't say in what condition you'll find the dead body. Sometimes the eyes are open, sometimes the mouth, teeth jutting out. It is frightful. You'd be scared.

MADHU: My god!

(REVATI *comes out with a broom and begins to sweep the verandah.*)

REVATI: Madhu, you still here? Haven't gone to school? You can't make a living merely by chitchatting.

MADHU: I'm going. (*Starts off; as he walks out*) You always get angry for no reason.

VASUDEO: You shouldn't talk to your mother like that.

(MADHU *goes away.*)

REVATI: This is great! You yourself teach him, and then advise him not to talk back.

VASUDEO: Why accuse me falsely? I know I'm to blame for these bad days, but that is no reason…

REVATI: Well, it's my good fortune that you've understood at least this much. But what's the use of just understanding? You should act accordingly.

VASUDEO: It is true Vahini, I understand, but I cannot … see Vahini—I'm like a dog who gets a few dry, stale pieces of bread to chew—I understand, but I cannot act, Vahini. (*He is overwhelmed.* REVATI *walks in with the broom.* VASUDEO *sits, listless.*)

(*Enter* KESHAV ABHYANKAR)

KESHAV: Vasudeva, you are neglecting the sangh. Your attendance has become infrequent. Only a fortnight left for Dasara—you are to lead the procession and you have not yet

started preparing yet!

VASUDEO: You care for Dasara, for processions, and I am worried about how I can live like a self-respecting individual. Keshav Anna, you know what circumstances I'm having to confront, don't you?

KESHAV: Vasudeva, you have brought all this upon yourself.

VASUDEO: After the insult at the Satyanarayan mahapuja, where should people who do anteshthi go? Which society will fulfil his daily needs? And Anna, you think I have caused all this? Superb, Anna!

KESHAV: It's not like that, Vasudeva. But as long as we have old fashioned people amongst us, we cannot introduce modern views.

VASUDEO: We have been saying this all along Anna—old fashioned people. How long are you going to say this? Whenever there is a social issue, all we do is just talk. Only empty words. When the time to strike back approaches, you, like a frightened dog, meekly search for an easy alternative. Remember when the question of the entry of untouchables into temples came up? You conveniently inaugurated a new temple called the Patit-Pawan temple. The seeds of division were sown. And when I speak about injustice, you blame me? You say that I'm responsible for the circumstances? You, who happen to be the spokesman of the 'All Hindus are One' association.

KESHAV: Vasudeva, it is my vision that Hindutva and all Hindus should be one. I am only sorry to say that people like Digambarshastri try to undermine it. They seem to live in the realm of the Peshwas—mind, body and soul, with their broad-bordered dhoti, twelve-string shirt, Peshwai pugree, tuft and sacred thread. To them only brahminism is Hindutva. In their thoughts and actions, they dream of the day when the Peshwai will be back. If I'm afraid of anybody, it is them.

VASUDEO: And I'm scared of people like you.

KESHAV: Vasudeva, you say this? It was I who opened the doors for people of all castes and communities—cobblers, untouchables—all … and you!

VASUDEO: One great man proclaimed—just snap your sacred thread and you'll win people over. And you said, this man is out to destroy religion. You made me wear that sacred thread, which I had discarded. (*Pause*) People like Digambarshastri expose their inner being, but people like you…

KESHAV: Vasudeva…

VASUDEO: Your description of Digambarshastri's dress is the secret desire of every brahmin's heart. They live in the hope of reviving the past. My father too was proud of having been born a brahmin. He used to speak of the Peshwai with such emotion! I too would feel proud once upon a time, but came to realize its futility at a very early age. There was once an udayapan ceremony at one of my teachers' homes. I went there with the other students. But he made me sit apart when food was being served. The reason? I happened to be a kirwant's son. He even made me clear my own plate after the meal was over.

KESHAV: But times are changing, Vasudeva.

VASUDEO: It was only two days ago that my nephew was given tea in a handle-less cup at Tilak's house. I still remember, Anna, I had just joined the sangh. On the field, under the saffron flag, we used to stand, all charged up, joining our voices to sing the same song, but as soon as we left the ground… But Anna, in your own house, your mother offered me tea in a cup kept aside.

KESHAV: My mother's behaviour—yes. But tell me, are you not comfortable in my house now? Can you complain about my wife? You have had meals with me on many occasions.

VASUDEO: Yes, what a great honour to me! But can you remember eating food at our place even once in the last thirteen years? How could you? In a house, where the dead are worshipped

all the time? How could you eat in such a house?

KESHAV: It's not fair for you to find fault with me all the time; I'd better not remain here if you do so. All my hopes have been dashed to the ground. I used to feel, since you threw yourself with real zest and passion into the work of the organization, that after me you would take on the leadership.

VASUDEO: Who, me? And yet, without weighing both sides you say that I'm to blame for all this! Anna, one word of consolation from you would have given me the strength of an elephant, but since you wish to be carried after your death by your fellow brahmins, why should you go against them? I can neither fight you, nor lay down my arms. Go, Anna, this is not a job for the spokesman of the 'All Hindus are One' association. I must fight the battle for my honour. That cannot be fought by putting weapons in somebody else's hands. (KESHAV *goes away in anger.*) Go and perform atonement for having heard curses at a kirwant's door. Cow-dung, urine, milk, curd, ghee—all this mixed up filth—eat it as panchagavya. Those who drink urine and eat dung—they talk of purity, don't they? Wearing a foul-smelling silk dhoti till it is reduced to tatters, and telling a clean person—'Can't you see that Digambarpant is dressed for puja?' Those who are untouchables themselves, declare others untouchable. Talk about superiority! Talk about protecting cows and drive away human beings. Go and shout in the name of Hinduism and ring praises of 'All Hindus are One'. I shall fight my battle alone, all by myself … but against whom should I fight this battle? (*Sits down in sheer helplessness*) Whom can I call mine? This house? Members of this house? My sister-in-law? She too finds fault with me these days. My brother? He treats me as if I have been his enemy for seven lives. And yet I am living like a lifeless moron, a burden to this earth… Why am I alive? Why don't I die? I must die, I must… (*As he goes out,* MADHU *comes crying into the house.* VASUDEO *does not pay any attention and walks away.*)

MADHU: Kaka... (*Sobs.* VASUDEO *stops and turns back.*) They hit me, took away my cap, cut my tuft, tore my clothes and threw dung on me.

VASUDEO: Who are those bastards?

MADHU: My classmates. They stopped me in the middle of the road, called me the son of a carcass-worshipper. My bag... (*Sobs*)

VASUDEO: Don't cry, I am here, who were the boys? Tell me their names.

DHABU: (*comes in concealing a bag*) Is Siddheshwarshastri home?

VASUDEO: No, gone out somewhere. Why are you standing so awkwardly?

DHABU: Nothing. Why is he crying?

VASUDEO: Are you hiding something in your hand?

DHABU: Yes, yes, I had come to hand over this. I found it on the road.

VASUDEO: I see.

DHABU: I opened the bag and in one of the books inside, I found Madhu's name. So, I picked it up and came here. (*About to hand the bag over to* MADHU *when* VASUDEO *snatches it away*)

VASUDEO: This is really a fine thing that you have done, Dhabu-shastri. Now one more small job is to be done. Please tell me the name of the boys who pestered Madhu and threw dung on his body.

DHABU: This is a little too much Vasudeva. How should I know?

VASUDEO: You're about to know. (*Hands the bag over to* MADHU. *Suddenly strikes* DHABU *across his face; he loses his balance and falls.*) Do you remember now?

DHABU: Vasudeva you'll pay for this. (*Puts his hand gingerly on his face*)

MADHU: (*runs in*) Aai, Kaka is fighting.

(REVATI *comes out.* VASUDEO *pulls* DHABU *up by the strings of his twelve-string shirt.*)

VASUDEO: Tell me. Who hit Madhu? Who threw dung on him?

DHABU: I really don't...

VASUDEO: Bastard, I know you inside out. You don't know anything, do you? Not even Garud Puran?

DHABU: Ga ... Garud Puran, oh, that was said in jest.

VASUDEO: Ah, in fun? I shall give you a blow in fun. (*Hits* DHABU *hard in the stomach.* DHABU *recoils in pain, holds his belly tightly and sits down.*)

REVATI: (*rushes out*) Are you going to kill him? (*Pushes him aside*) (*Enter* SIDDHESHWAR. *Under extreme psychological pressure,* DIGAMBARSHASTRI'S *words whirl about in his mind: 'Kill Vasudeo. That is the only way to your happiness.'* 'After all, he is my brother.' *'Kill him.'* 'He is my brother.' SIDDHESHWAR *holds his head tightly and sits on the verandah.*

DHABU *gets up and flees, holding his belly.*)

REVATI: You are crying! What's wrong? What happened? You had gone to Digambarshastri, hadn't you? (SIDDHESHWAR *bursts out crying.*)

VASUDEO: Come on. Tell us what happened. Why did you go to that rogue?

SIDDHESHWAR: I will kill you!

REVATI: Won't you let us live in peace? (VASUDEO *moves away and sits down helplessly.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: How long can I suffer? My strength has ebbed away. Father, you put Vasudeo in my arms and breathed your last, but I cannot protect him any longer. Please forgive me. (*Wipes away his tears*)

MADHU: Baba, don't cry. (SIDDHESHWAR *holds* MADHU *close to him and runs his hands over him with great fondness.*) Baba, are you unwell?

SIDDHESHWAR: No, nothing... (*Puts on a forced smile*) Really, nothing is wrong with me ... how dirty your clothes are! Go, change them.

MADHU: What should I wear instead?

SIDDHESHWAR: Wear a clean shirt.

MADHU: Oh! But that one tore long ago; you never bought me another.

REVATI: This is soiled with dung. It has to be washed.

SIDDHESHWAR: His whole body is smeared with dung. Take him away and give him a bath. Give me his old shirt, I'll mend it. (REVATI *takes* MADHU *away.*) And look here, give me my puja garment too. It is torn at the knee. I have missed this morning's sandhya; I'll have to do the evening one.

(VASUDEO, *preoccupied, gets up and proceeds to go out.*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Where are you going now?

VASUDEO: Didn't you see? Madhu was covered with dung? He was beaten on the way to school. I'll find out who the culprits are. He has lost his cap too. I'll look for it. Or else tomorrow he will have to go to school bare headed! That doesn't look good.

SIDDHESHWAR: He does not go to school from tomorrow.

VASUDEO: Yes, he will go to school. If you cannot manage to pay for him, I'll teach him. I'll beg for it if necessary.

SIDDHESHWAR: I don't want any arguments.

VASUDEO: I too don't want any. (*Goes out*)

SIDDHESHWAR: Vasudeva…

(REVATI *comes out with a torn shirt and the puja garment. She gives it to* SIDDHESHWAR.)

REVATI: Where has he gone now?

SIDDHESHWAR: To hell … put this thread through, will you? (*Looks closely at the shirt*) There are holes all over. It cannot be mended.

REVATI: If you cannot mend it, buy a new one.

SIDDHESHWAR: Even though you know what the circumstances are? I shall get work and earn money … only then can I buy a new one. (*Pause*) It is a matter of time. Have to wait for some time. (REVATI *puts the thread through the needle and gives it to* SIDDHESHWAR *and takes away the torn shirt.*)

REVATI: (*while leaving*) Damn this miserable existence!

SIDDHESHWAR (*Begins mending the puja garment.* REVATI'S *words have hurt him to the core. His fevered mind wanders, as he recalls all the unkind words that he has had to hear. 'Damn this miserable existence!'*) 'Siddheshwarshastri Joshi, nobody is a friend or companion in your penury—not even your own blood relations.' The helpless even have to swallow the gift of kicks. (*His mind starts going out of control. Every word that comes to his mind lacerates him all the more:* DIGAMBAR: *'Kill Vasudeo, that is the only way to your happiness.'* DHABU: *'Atone for your sins … the gold doll…' The shriek of the witch pounds in his head.* VASUDEO: *'You are a crow! Why don't you swallow that pinda yourself?'* MADHU: *'That one tore long ago, you haven't bought me a new one.'* REVATI: *'Damn this miserable existence!'* SIDDHESHWAR'S *mind cracks up.*) Miserable life! (*Hugs the dhoti that he is trying to mend*) Miserable though it may seem, the heritage of my father … handed down in the family … must preserve it … seventeen generations of my family lived on this—stitching the torn fabric … life, torn away at so many points … mended at so many points … (*The needle suddenly pricks him.*) Witch, you sting me too, like a scorpion? (*Blows softly on the finger*) … my breath takes away the pain of your sting … plodded through life in the faith that this garment would one day bring solace to my life … abided by religion … mending this garment … but this … tears at so many places … stitch one spot … gives way at another … tearing, sewing … for eternity … no comfort for my wounds … my pain … why should I preserve you? For what? (*Tears it from end to end*) Hey, you! I am not tearing you, I am binding you by the string of my thoughts … mind as mighty as the mountain … limitless … cannot be captured by a stormy wind … mind—annihilated under the heel of tradition … I am joining that? Have to join it. Join countless minds who died on earth straight to heaven. I am the prophet who brings about a union of minds. I am of the highest religious merit … proved by the vedas and the puranas … none on this earth as great as …

I am a crow, no, I am a person of repute, yet driven away from sites of religious merit. Why? Is it true that I am person of merit? Or is it true that I am not a crow? Is it false that I am not a crow or is it false that I have no religious merit…? You have cheated me. O vedas, O puranas, O smrutis—you have cheated me and made me a crow. What is this? Who has put this noose round my neck? I can't breathe. Take it away … take away this noose. (*Takes off the sacred thread and throws it away*) What's this boil now? (*Grips the knot of the tuft*) It throbs so painfully … filled with pus. O Goddess Chamunda, you rest on the tip of my tuft and (*tugs at the tuft of hair*) you tricked me … turned me into a crow, eating filth from the dunghill. People detest me all the time but when someone dies, they give me some honour. I'm a crow. A divine being cursed by Ram. (*Breaks down and weeps*) You divine being, you crow, you carcass-worshipper, why do you weep…? Madhu you are not to shed tears, I shall give you the best education possible. Acquire knowledge, live with honour… Oh yes… (*Enter* MADHU *wearing the torn shirt. Frightened by* SIDDHESHWAR'S *strange appearance, he runs inside the house.*) You are the son of a carcass-worshipper. You must follow your father's vocation. (*Enter* VASUDEO) Oh come, come, welcome! Someone died in the family? You go ahead. I'll follow … apply ghee to the dead body … it stiffens if you wait too long. Don't sit crying near the dead body. Don't cry … don't cry…

VASUDEO: I am Vasudeo, your brother.

SIDDHESHWAR: What did you say, brother? Whose brother? (REVATI *comes out, followed by the frightened* MADHU.) Brother of this crow? Your mother gave birth to a crow. I am a crow who touches the pinda offered to the dead and gives freedom to the soul of the dead. (REVATI *stands still as a statue, not knowing what to do.*) You are proud to call your brother a crow … caw … caw … caw … say that I am a crow, a crow born to your mother. (*Goes near* REVATI) Who? Did you recognize me…?

No...? I am a crow, born to his mother.

REVATI: (*in a soft trembling voice*) What happened? What's wrong with you?

SIDDHESHWAR: Caw ... caw ... I am a crow, where's the pinda? I am a crow that touches the pinda, a crow that liberates men... I am a crow, caw ... caw... (*He suddenly hears many crows cawing together, almost attacking his senses in a vicious assault:* DIGAMBAR: *'Kill Vasudeo, that is the only way to your happiness ... caw ... caw...'* DHABU: *'Atone and be done with ... golden doll.' The witch shrieks '... caw ... caw...'* VASUDEO: *'You are a crow! Why didn't you swallow that pinda yourself...? caw ... caw...'* MADHU: *'That was torn long ago, you haven't bought me a new one ... caw ... caw...'* REVATI: *A curse on this miserable existence! ... caw ... caw.'*

(*The acute pain in* SIDDHESHWAR'S *head grows, and he feels a shooting pain in his chest. He holds his chest tightly and collapses.* VASUDEO *and* REVATI *rush to him and help him recline. The pain increases, until the last attack silences him into death.* REVATI *cries out piteously. Wipes away the red mark on her forehead, breaks her bangles.* MADHU *too weeps loudly and* VASUDEO *laments to himself.* VASUDEO *goes in and brings an old dhoti, spreads it on* SIDDHESHWAR'S *lifeless body.*)

VASUDEO: Vahini, control yourself. (*Pause*) Vahini...

REVATI: Are you happy now?

VASUDEO: Vahini!

REVATI: You, you are responsible for all this. You have taken revenge on me and my family.

VASUDEO: Madhu, don't cry! (*Wipes his own eyes*)

REVATI: You've ruined everything.

VASUDEO: Vahini, enough now. We have to make all the preparations.

REVATI: How are you concerned? You are our enemy! For the last seven generations! Go away from here. I shall decide what is to be done. (*Goes in, brings a book wrapped in a saffron coloured cloth and places it at* SIDDHESHWAR'S *feet.*) Madhu, come here. Bow down and open this.

MADHU: Aai, what's that?

REVATI: The wish of your father: Garud Puran. Now bow down.

VASUDEO: Vahini, this is not right.

REVATI: Madhu!

MADHU: Aai, I am scared.

VASUDEO: This is the curse that has destroyed the family; don't impose it on this young boy.

REVATI: What's that to you?

VASUDEO: I won't let you do this. (*Takes* MADHU *away*)

REVATI: Madhu is my son. I shall decide what he is to do.

VASUDEO: Vahini, are you the same person who wanted Madhu to study and lead a respectable life?

REVATI: I am also a wife. It is the duty of a wife to see that the wishes of her husband are fulfilled, and Madhu, as a son, is bound by duty to fulfil the wishes of his father. Or else, his soul will not rest in peace. I shall not incur the sin of leaving his soul dissatisfied.

VASUDEO: Soul! Soul! Soul! I don't know what is in store for this soul; the life of this soul will be engulfed in darkness, Vahini, I…

(REVATI *opens the book and places it in* MADHU'S *hands.*)

MADHU: Kaka… (VASUDEO *goes to him*)

REVATI: Are you not satisfied even though you've made me a widow? (VASUDEO *watches helplessly*) Madhu, start reciting.

MADHU: Aai, I don't know anything about this.

REVATI: You start now, or else…

(*Sobbing,* MADHU *starts reading the Garud Puran and* VASUDEO *watches helplessly.*)

MADHU: To Shiva, and all the gods
I salute again…
The people who have expired
From this day of death—
For the whole year
The rites are to be prescribed.

(REVATI *weeps bitterly. As the curtain comes down, an abhanga is heard.*)

Born on the earth
Death is inevitable
So do not grieve
For life.

Gandhi–Ambedkar

translated by

Shanta Gokhale

(A circus clown is busy playing with a globe, tossing it and catching it. He notices the audience.)

CLOWN: Well, well. So you've come. To see me play. Look here. Watch. (*Tosses the globe high in the air and catches it*) I know you like my games. My tricks. My multi-coloured costume. These shoes and this tasselled cap. Most of all, I know you love the red bulb on the tip of my nose. Kids love me but I have a place in adult hearts too. Your age doesn't matter. You like everything about me. (*Tosses the globe, catches it, takes a turn, places the globe on the ground*) Yes, that's it. You like everything about me. You adore my acrobatics, my teasing, my prinking and preening. You are amused by all this and call me a great clown. (*Glances at the globe and starts. Walks gingerly towards it. Screams*) Run, run. Bomb. (*He runs around hysterically then stops.*) What? You're not running? So the bomb didn't explode? (*Goes towards the globe, slowly*) Yup. Didn't explode. Did not explode. And there I was… You must have thought the clown is joking. But even if it had exploded and my body had been torn to shreds, my limbs scattered everywhere, bloodied and gory, you'd still have found me entertaining. Because I am after all a clown from a circus or a Sanskrit play, or a sutradhar in a different dress, the narrator, the chorus. Call me anything, but what I amount to is a fool made to entertain you. But how long must this go on? How long must I slip and fall and why should I entertain you? No. Why should I do as you command? Against my wishes? (*Points to the globe*) This is your earth. Here is your country. Your people. Their minds. Every mind is a Mohen … Mohen … Mohenjodaro.

Try excavating it. You'll be amazed at the things that are hidden there. To come back to the point. This is the earth and this your country. What do you mean what's this thing called country? Has the country sunk so low? Torn to pieces by religions, sects, castes. The Aryans came, then the Shakas, Huns, Moguls, the British. They enslaved this country. The history of this country … what's that? You have nothing to do with history. What a lie that is. Not a day passes without your playing a trick on history. You speak of the vedas and puranas, sing the praises of Ram and Sita, call Buddha an atheist, criticize Ashoka, turn your noses up at Babur, bow low to Shivaji, worship Dnyaneshwar–Tukaram, fold your hands before Tilak and Gokhale, and Gandhi–Ambedkar…

(*The* CLOWN *spins around once, and tosses the globe.* GANDHI *and* AMBEDKAR *come into view as the stage lights up.* GANDHI *is busy having some refreshments.* AMBEDKAR *is agitated. Noticing this, the* CLOWN *makes a beeline for* GANDHI, *who is 62, and wears just a loincloth and shoulder-cloth.* AMBEDKAR *is 40, dressed in a suit. The place is Mani Bhavan. The year is 1931.*)

CLOWN: (*softly*) Gandhiji, Dr Ambedkar is here. If you don't pay attention to him, he'll leave. He might even feel insulted.

GANDHI: Is he here? I thought the man sitting before me was someone else… Please.

(*Hands over the dish of snacks to the* CLOWN. *The* CLOWN *leaves.*)

AMBEDKAR: It's alright.

GANDHI: So tell me. What do you have to say?

AMBEDKAR: What could I have to say? You've asked me to come because you have something to say. So tell me.

GANDHI: (*pause*) I've heard a lot about you.

AMBEDKAR: Like?

GANDHI: That you have many complaints against me, against the Congress.

AMBEDKAR: Why shouldn't I? I have no Motherland. I have no Homeland.

GANDHI: What's that you said? You don't have a Motherland?

AMBEDKAR: That's right. I have no Motherland.

GANDHI: But you do have a Motherland, Dr Ambedkar.

AMBEDKAR: Do I? Then why do the people of my Motherland treat me this way?

GANDHI: Which way?

AMBEDKAR: When I think about my life in general, I constantly feel I don't have a Motherland, I don't have a country. It's as though…

GANDHI: Why do you stop? Speak out. Free your mind.

AMBEDKAR: Free my mind? How do I do that?

GANDHI: By speaking. Only then will I understand what you are thinking

AMBEDKAR: Can I feel easy in my mind by merely speaking? I feel as if I have been wounded deeply and that one wound has multiplied into numerous wounds all over my body. Nobody with any respect for himself will think of this country and the Hindu religion as his. This country has committed such an unforgivable crime against us that even if we turn traitors…

GANDHI: Traitors to this country? You, Dr Ambedkar, speak of turning a traitor? Impossible. True you have suffered much pain, you have endured torture, humiliation everywhere. But your heart is filled with love for your country. I have heard about your work at the Round Table Conference in London. You have done enormous service to the country. You, who told the British in no uncertain words, in their own land, that the only kind of government we want in this country is one that respects people's feelings, how can you ever turn traitor?

AMBEDKAR: If such a thing is true, the credit for it must go to my conscience. I am truly anxious about how I can look after the interests of my people without hurting the interests of the country. And yet you have not shown the generosity of spirit to express even simple sympathy for our work. On the contrary you went and declared our just and independent struggle

at the Kalaram temple as unjust. If this is the attitude of a man of wisdom like you, what can we expect from bigoted touchables?

GANDHI: You appear to be under the wrong impression. What I said about your struggle for entry into the Kalaram temple was that a satyagraha is unnecessary to gain entry into a temple that is ruled by custom. It is the duty of the touchables to open the temple to untouchables.

AMBEDKAR: That's a fine thing. So we too must follow your wishes? We, our lives, our self-esteem mean absolutely nothing? It is evident that the country, you and the Congress need your minds to be cleansed.

GANDHI: Dr Ambedkar, I have been grappling with the problem of untouchables from even before you were born. And here you stand telling me that my mind needs cleansing? In fact the problem of untouchables belongs to social and religious conferences. Despite this, I have introduced the question into the agenda of the Congress. I have convinced them, that while our minds are soiled with the sinful idea of untouchability, our country will not win independence. And even if it does, it will not be able to enjoy it. For me, this problem is more important, closer to my heart, than even the Hindu–Muslim question. That is why the Congress has spent lakhs of rupees on it. Schools have been opened for untouchables, free medicines have been distributed. And yet you say...

AMBEDKAR: Please don't let my straight talk upset you Gandhiji. To date history has shown that the whirlwinds that great souls create with their wordy philosophies lull people into a daze. But once the dust has settled and the atmosphere has cleared, the ground is seen to be exactly at the same level as before. Souls like you are incapable of raising the level of society, because you are like fleeting illusions. That's why we do not wish to rely on great souls like you. Your pity is not going to help us. Untouchables are, without doubt, a separate

and independent community like the Sikhs and the Muslims.

GANDHI: Not true. Untouchables are an integral part of the Hindu community. Politically they cannot be separated from Hindus.

AMBEDKAR: Why not? The Hindu community comprises the four varnas—brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya and shudra. In this scheme of things, the untouchables become the fifth varna.

GANDHI: Whether they are the fourth or the fifth, I consider them a part of the Hindu community. The Sikhs and the Muslims will always practise Sikhism and Islam. Do the untouchables mean to hold on to their untouchability forever? I don't even accept untouchables as a category in public records. I have to admit that you proved to the British during the First Round Table Conference that untouchables were a group independent of the Hindus. In fact, the aim of that conference was to discuss the future Constitution of Hindustan. By raising the question of untouchables you managed to obstruct the main agenda of the Conference. Had I been present there, I would never have allowed this to happen. As a matter of fact, there was no need for a second representative of untouchables when I had been their true representative even before you.

AMBEDKAR: Does this mean that you will ditch the political interests of untouchables simply in order to oppose me?

GANDHI: If they are given independent representation in accordance with your demand, they will remain untouchable permanently.

AMBEDKAR: I know better than you what they will or will not be.

GANDHI: I am also against giving special concessions and reservation quotas to untouchables. Doing so is not the way to end untouchability and caste discrimination.

AMBEDKAR: It is a good thing that I have heard all these things directly from your mouth. I am now even more convinced that your mind has not been cleansed in our regard.

GANDHI: The question is not about my mind and its cleansing. It is about untouchability for which untouchables are not to blame. It is a blot on the Hindu faith and it is for those who see themselves as high caste to erase it.

AMBEDKAR: Untouchability is not a blot on the Hindu faith. It is a blot on our bodies and we ourselves must wash it away. To understand the pain of untouchability, you had once said, 'God should give me birth in a family of untouchables in my next life.' Seeing how your heart is wrenched by untouchability, I really think you should have been born an untouchable.

GANDHI: The bitter experiences you have had appear to have confused your reason.

AMBEDKAR: My reason? Perhaps it will be confused further and you will have to pay the price for it, by granting untouchables an independent existence, no less. I must leave.

(AMBEDKAR *leaves.* GANDHI *falls into deep thought. The* CLOWN *enters. Begins to play with the globe around* GANDHI)

GANDHI: Please. Don't trouble me.

CLOWN: Did you say something to me?

GANDHI: What do you want?

CLOWN: Nothing.

GANDHI: Then why do you trouble me?

CLOWN: Do I trouble you? People feel happy at the very sight of me, and you…

GANDHI: Look, I want peace.

CLOWN: Do one thing. Play with this globe.

GANDHI: Will you please go away?

CLOWN: You want me to go?

GANDHI: If you don't go this minute…

CLOWN: Why are you venting your anger with that Dr Ambedkar on me?

GANDHI: Anger with Dr Ambedkar?

CLOWN: Please calm down first. Then regain control over your inner voice quietly.

GANDHI: My inner voice. Goodness, you … how did I not recognize you?

CLOWN: What do you expect when you've been thinking of nothing else but that Dr Ambedkar's ideas? Don't say I didn't warn you when you decided to call him here for a meeting. I said, 'Good, but be careful.' Before you knew it, he put you in a fix didn't he? Has anybody dared question you till today? He's turned all your greatness to mud. He called you an illusion. You had been concerned about the fifth varna from even before Ambedkar was born. Did all that thinking amount to a mere illusion? You had once said that there was nobody in sight who could be a leader of the people of the fifth varna. What is your opinion about that now?

GANDHI: I'd always thought of Ambedkar who so passionately champions the cause of the fifth varna as a brahmin. As they say, it's your own people who strike back.

CLOWN: So what do you intend doing now?

GANDHI: Intend doing?

CLOWN: About that Dr Ambedkar who called you an illusion and threatened that you'd have to pay a price…

GANDHI: Will you please keep quiet and let me think?

CLOWN: Sure, go ahead and think. But tell me the truth. Have you in your whole life met an opponent like him?

(*The* CLOWN *tosses the globe. Blackout. Lights come up.* AMBEDKAR *is busy reading a book. The* CLOWN *arrives, playing with the globe.*)

AMBEDKAR: Dear Clown, you are disturbing me in my reading.

CLOWN: You always say that.

AMBEDKAR: Are you upset with me? Don't be. Tell me, what's your game now?

CLOWN: You are the ones who play games. We, the common folk, suffer.

AMBEDKAR: You call yourself common. You are most uncommon. One game of yours gets results that ten of my speeches don't.

CLOWN: What nonsense.

AMBEDKAR: No, really. I know how art understands the workings of the human heart and assails the very core of it. The tamashas are still alive in our villages, the jalse and khele with their clowns committed to the cause of social education. They launch such undercover attacks that…

CLOWN: …that even great souls are routed.

AMBEDKAR: I can see I am under attack. But what wrong do you think I did?

CLOWN: There was no need to reduce a great soul into nothing. You went and put your hand straight into the tiger's jaws. Now this wounded tiger will roar so loudly that all the poor creatures of this jungle will tremble and quake.

AMBEDKAR: I know exactly how tigers whose roars keep the jungle awake are to be brought down. We are the descendants of brave-hearts like Shidnak and Rainak—mahars who served the maratha armies.

CLOWN: But a wounded tiger will still kill a few lambs.

AMBEDKAR: My dear Clown, do you think those who are fearless before tigers don't know this? It is better to live like a lion for one day than like sheep for a hundred.

CLOWN: (*claps*) This line will get thunderous applause, Doctor-saheb.

AMBEDKAR: You mean my followers are merely clapping experts?

CLOWN: Not altogether. But when the hands that clap are the very hands that bend low to beg…

AMBEDKAR: The hands that beg also have the strength to hold a cane. Think of Shidnak, Rainak and their deeds. My people's hands gifted the Peshwas another Panipat in the Koregaon battle.

CLOWN: I know of their deeds, which made the Peshwa and his men run for their lives. Yes, but those hands fought against this country. They were partners of the British.

AMBEDKAR: My dear Clown, how can you blame the hands for that? This country never accepted those hands as its own.

These hands which guarded the borders of villages were always forced to live abjectly outside those borders. They weren't free to even walk through the village. They had to tie brooms to their feet so the footsteps they left behind were swept clean. They had to wear spittoons around their necks to spit in. It was those hands that sank the Peshwa's rule, which had mocked humanity so terribly.

CLOWN: Even then, the question remains. What about their treachery against the country?

AMBEDKAR: Did they have a country? And what about the treachery of those who did? The British settlement in the north became secure because of the Bengal army that destroyed Sikh power. Who were the people in this army? Men of the upper castes, brahmins and rajputs. In the First World War, Gandhi himself sided with the British. And yet they are patriots, and we...? Don't you think these hands that fought for the British would have fought for the country? But nobody considered these hands as theirs.

CLOWN: Not even Gandhiji?

AMBEDKAR: I am certainly indebted to Gandhiji for his warmth in accepting us as his fellows. But which is the greater love, the nanny's or the mother's? Gandhiji strokes our heads with the love of a nanny. But when it comes to sheltering us under his wings with the love of a mother, he pushes us away. If it were not so, would he have opposed the battle for self-esteem that I had launched?

CLOWN: I don't know about nannies and mothers. What I do see is your race for leadership.

AMBEDKAR: What was that? Race for leadership?

CLOWN: Forgive me Doctor-saheb. If Gandhiji feels the fifth varna should get justice and you too are fighting for the same, why then is there this rift between you?

AMBEDKAR: I cannot live on somebody's pity.

CLOWN: That is why you've pulled out the weapon of a separate

electorate? Sounds like fun. When the British themselves have conceded that untouchables should elect their own untouchable leaders, there's nothing left to say.

AMBEDKAR: Political rights are the rays that lights our path to justice.

CLOWN: Dreams and aspirations are all very well, but what about the country?

AMBEDKAR: Are we alone responsible for harming the country? Don't the Muslims have a separate electorate? Don't the Sikhs have independent representation?

CLOWN: So you will not give up the chance to put Gandhiji in a bind?

AMBEDKAR: Why should I?

CLOWN: Quite right. Don't. Gandhi and Ambedkar—two tiger cubs … why, tigers! Face to face. Go for it.

(*The* CLOWN *tosses the globe. Blackout. Voice-over cuts through the dark*)

VOICE-OVER: Good folks, listen oh listen! Gandhiji will continue with his fast unto death till the British government withdraws the scheme that allows untouchables to form a separate electorate.

(*Lights.* GANDHI *on a fast. The* CLOWN *stands nearby, dejected. The place is Yerawada Jail, Pune. The year is 1932*)

CLOWN: What are you trying to do Mahatmaji?

GANDHI: Should I not do penance for things that have gone against my wishes? You know very well that I pleaded with all my strength, but the government still persisted with the scheme of granting the fifth varna a separate electorate.

CLOWN: So you began this fast unto death?

GANDHI: I am doing it to cleanse my soul.

CLOWN: Is it for inner cleansing or a cover-up for your political failure? You behave in such incomprehensible ways sometimes.

GANDHI: So should I have kept quiet and not done anything?

CLOWN: You too had signed the petition asking the British

government to take a decision on the question of minorities.

GANDHI: Yes I had. So?

CLOWN: So you have a moral obligation to accept the government's decision. Instead of which…

GANDHI: Yes, but then what about my inner voice?

CLOWN: The country is in turmoil because of your fast.

GANDHI: What's surprising about that?

CLOWN: It means you are opposing your own people.

GANDHI: My people?

CLOWN: Are the fifth varna not your people?

GANDHI: I have spent a lifetime working towards their uplift.

CLOWN: And yet … your love for the fifth varna is a nanny's love. You don't love them from the gut as a mother would.

GANDHI: Are you trying to suggest that the love I bear for the fifth varna is false?

CLOWN: If your love is true, then why do you oppose the separate electorate that has been granted them, opening a path to their freedom?

GANDHI: The fifth varna is an indivisible part of the Hindu faith. I cannot accept any act that sets them apart. If a separate electorate is granted to the fifth varna today, soon the brahmins will want one, followed by the marathas and soon we will have feuding castes.

CLOWN: What about the feud that will erupt with the Muslims then? Why have you accepted a separate electorate for them?

GANDHI: Did I accept it? It was accepted in the time of Gokhale and Tilak. Why do you attribute other people's sins to me?

CLOWN: If it is a sin why has no attempt been made till today to erase it? Are you going to continue with that inheritance? You can certainly do that but then please give up your hypocrisy.

GANDHI: Dear Clown!

CLOWN: You are the champion of truth, yet you cannot accept truths. You have started this fast out of fear that Dr Ambedkar will bring your political prestige down into dust.

GANDHI: Go. Go away—out of my sight. (*Breaks into a coughing fit*)

CLOWN: Sure. What's the point of staying where people are not willing to listen to the truth? (*Stands apart*)

GANDHI: Go away. Don't stand around. (*Coughs*)

CLOWN: It's a situation one wouldn't wish on one's enemy. Who knows what's going to become of this Mahatma.

GANDHI: Water… (*The* CLOWN *looks on.*)

GANDHI: Water … water!

CLOWN: Enough of these childish tantrums Gandhiji.

GANDHI: Water. (*The* CLOWN *gives him water.*)

CLOWN: How long will your frail body last on just water mixed with salt and soda? This country needs you.

GANDHI: Everybody needs me. You don't need to worry so much and be in such a hurry to save my life. Not even a blade of grass moves without god's will. If god wills that I should continue to render my service to my country, he will keep me alive. I too am a member of those upper castes who have laboured until now to keep the fifth varna down in the dirt. And yet it is an astonishing thing that the fifth varna continues to remain within the Hindu fold. This means there is some secret power in the Hindu faith which I cannot explain. Indeed I am convinced that the fifth varna is an integral part of the larger Hindu family.

CLOWN: Sure. But that integral part called Dr Ambedkar doesn't seem to understand this.

GANDHI: He will.

CLOWN: When? After you are gone? Devdas is pleading with the Doctor-saheb to save his father's life.

GANDHI: Naturally. I am after all his father.

CLOWN: Kasturba holds out her pallu to him saying the kumkum on her forehead is in Dr Ambedkar's hands.

GANDHI: I would say her behaviour accords with her wifely duty. A Hindu woman is bound to plead for her husband's life.

CLOWN: But such abjectness?

GANDHI: Whether I go with it or not, my inner voice tells me that everything is happening according to divine design.

CLOWN: But why is the design so weak that it doesn't impel Dr Ambedkar to save your life?

GANDHI: It will.

CLOWN: But when? It's the fifth day of your fast.

GANDHI: Give me some water.

CLOWN: I find this whole thing unendurable.

(*The* CLOWN *puts a glass of water to* GANDHI'S *lips.* AMBEDKAR *enters*)

AMBEDKAR: How are you feeling Gandhiji?

CLOWN: This is called rubbing salt into a wound.

(AMBEDKAR *looks at the* CLOWN.)

GANDHI: I was certain you would come.

AMBEDKAR: You are doing a great injustice to us.

GANDHI: It is my fate that I should be forced to do things that make me look unjust. I am helpless against it.

AMBEDKAR: Now what do you desire me to do for you?

GANDHI: Ambedkar, I recall your once saying that my life was useful to you.

AMBEDKAR: Yes. My exact words were, 'If you devote your life to securing the interests of the untouchables, you will be a hero to us.'

GANDHI: (*smiling mildly*) Your hero. Which means you have understood how to save my life.

AMBEDKAR: Yes. And that is why I am here. Just as your life is important, so is the life of my community. I will save your life. You must save my community's life. My community must be allowed to live with the same self-respect as people of the upper castes.

GANDHI: I understand your pain. I am grateful to you for giving the Hindu faith the opportunity to make amends for the sins that have been committed in the past in its name.

AMBEDKAR: I too am grateful for the helping hand you are extending for the uplift of my people.

GANDHI: Tell me. What can I do for you?

(AMBEDKAR *sits beside* GANDHI. *Freeze. The* CLOWN *does a crazy dance.*)

CLOWN: All is sweet when the end is sweet. But why this sourness on your tongue? Why are you still sad? Imagine, the temples will be open to the fifth varna. They will enter the sanctum sanctorum. They will have a glimpse of god. Are you sad because that will pollute your god? The fifth varna will go to the common well. They will drink its water. Are you sad because their touch will change the colour of your water? Mahatma Gandhi who used to say the fifth varna is an integral part of the Hindu faith and cannot be separated from the Hindus, has signed the Poona Pact, acknowledging their separate existence. Is that why there's rage on your faces? What a pity! Forget your rage and look at the sight. The fifth varna will walk up and down the streets. They will hold their heads high. They will go to schools. Study. Become doctors, engineers, professors. They will sit with you shoulder to shoulder. They will entice your girls. They will become your sons-in-law. Dear dear! Your faces still look sour. What is all this? Everybody welcomed the Poona Pact between Gandhi and Ambedkar. Even the Hindu Mahasabha, which you venerate and place all your faith in. It was natural that they should. Because the four upper varnas stand to gain by the agreement as much as the fifth varna. It ensures that Dr Ambedkar's plan of the fifth varna choosing its own candidates for the elections is ground into the dust. There is already a shining sun named Gandhi in the firmament. Now is there to be another named Dr Ambedkar? One firmament and two suns? How is that possible? Isn't that why this towel-clad Gandhiji pulled out the weapon of fast unto death and brought Ambedkar down to the ground so that his political sun would continue to blaze? Did that not make you happy? Won't you laugh now? Go on: laugh, laugh, laugh. (*Laughs and throws the globe up in the air. The stage darkens. When the lights*

come up again, AMBEDKAR *is making a speech and the* CLOWN *is sitting in a corner, far away.*)

AMBEDKAR: Friends, I am grateful to you for the letter of honour you have presented to me for the work I have done for your welfare. However, the words of praise you have used in the letter, have elevated a man who is one of you to the level of a god. Such feelings will obstruct your own interests. The feeling that you can turn another into a god and place the responsibility of your uplift entirely on his shoulders is one that will turn you away from doing your duty. If you stick to these ideas, you will certainly be like logs swept away by the current. This habit of turning people into gods will destroy you as it has already destroyed the Hindus. If there is one reason why Hindustan is so low in achievement, it is because of this rampant divinity. The people of other nations face calamities that befall the country by standing united to save themselves. But our Hindu religion has created in us the belief that man is powerless. If our nation is stricken by calamity, god descends amongst us in human form and saves us. The Hindus are waiting for god. But you—you need not even wonder whether there is a god or not. Just believe that whatever happens upon this earth is man's doing. Nobody is going to come to save you. If your mind is made up, you will do it yourselves. You will not progress by fasting on holy days, by going on pilgrimage to Pandharpur, Trayambak, Kashi and Haridwar, or by reading scriptures that praise your favourite deities. Your ancestors did all this for centuries without making a whit of a difference to your depressing circumstances. Fasts did not help you escape starvation. There is only one path now to your empowerment and that is politics and the law. Neither god nor fate are the reason why you do not have food to eat, homes to live in and means of livelihood. To give you food, clothes and homes is the task of the government in power, ensured by the laws it makes.

The law is the home of all happiness. That is why we must appropriate the power to enact laws. Forget the rituals of religion and turn to the law. That is the only path to your progress. Remember, a society grows strong only when it is wide awake, educated and self-respecting.

CLOWN: (*comes forward clapping*) Great! Terrific! Wonderful!! I find your ideas very appealing. I am convinced by these bold words that incite the fifth varna against god and fate. But then where does that leave your agitation to gain entry into temples?

AMBEDKAR: Entry into temples! The Congress and Gandhiji opened old dilapidated temples to us to show their sympathy for our cause. Not even dogs enter those temples. Why then should we think of fighting to enter temples? In Gujarat, Gandhi's home state, not a single temple has been thrown open to us. How is entering a temple going to help us better our condition? Now we have only one goal in mind—to destroy the four varnas. I want to destroy the four varnas and create a single religion based on humanity and humanism. If I cannot achieve that, we will not only give up temples but the Hindu religion itself.

CLOWN: You mean then to destroy the system of varnas, which Gandhiji has been at such pains to support? But there is caste discrimination within the fifth varna too.

AMBEDKAR: That sin belongs to the varna system. Once the varna system is destroyed, castes within the fifth varna will also be destroyed automatically.

CLOWN: But will Gandhiji allow you to destroy the varna system?

AMBEDKAR: Not Gandhiji alone. Nobody whose conscience is awake will oppose my thinking. The question is, whose side will Gandhiji choose to be on? On the side of the varna system or on mine? If he chooses to side with orthodoxy, what is the point in looking at tomorrow's enemy as a friend today?

CLOWN: One had hoped that you and Gandhiji would work

together towards a common goal, but that is not to be.

AMBEDKAR: Gandhiji's agitation for the fifth varna's entry into temples was but a political ploy. The aim was to destroy my political life and prove to the world that he alone was the champion of the untouchables.

CLOWN: When did you realize this?

AMBEDKAR: From the very beginning. But if I could have ensured the welfare of my people without conflict, through the cooperation of the orthodoxy, I would have wanted it. I didn't want to expend all my energy on the trivial question of temple entry. There are innumerable other questions to resolve. That is why I decided to trust Gandhi. And the reason why I lost in the crucial battle for a separate electorate was Kasturba. If a woman spreads her pallu before me and says that the kumkum on her forehead is in my hands … well I'm human, am I not? I too have a heart. (*In a trembling voice*) My hardened heart melted with pity for that mother-like woman. There were the political rights of my people on one side and on the other Gandhi's life. I am happy to have saved Gandhiji's life. (*The* CLOWN'S *eyes suddenly grow moist.*) But why are there tears in your eyes?

CLOWN: Tears? Not at all.

AMBEDKAR: The tongue might lie but tears don't. (*The* CLOWN *wipes his eyes.*) I know there is another face hiding behind this painted face. You too wish you could scrape this paint off and stop dancing to other people's tunes.

CLOWN: I do. But I realize in the very same moment that I don't have a choice.

AMBEDKAR: But you are the life breath of artistic talent. When it becomes difficult to call out to the brutal mind of society, then it is this breath that assumes your form. That is why you became weepy at what I said. And perhaps I spoke my mind because it was you I was speaking to. You and I are not different.

CLOWN: So true.

AMBEDKAR: And yet I am puzzled that you have tears in your eyes.

CLOWN: Shall I tell you the truth? You were speaking of Kasturba-ben. But it wasn't she I was thinking of. It was Ramabai. Your Ramu. Your whole life has been like an open book. You have spent a lifetime studying, reading thousands of books. How is it that the great doctor who said if he lost his sight with too much reading, life would not be worth living, was unable to read a single page of his wife's life-book? What did you give your wife besides sorrow and penury? She had to battle poverty all her life despite having such an intellectual giant for a husband. She had to make and sell dung cakes to run the house. You saw the kumkum on Kasturba's forehead and your heart melted. You saved Gandhiji's life. You showed your human kindness. But how is it that you didn't see the kumkum that your wife painted on her forehead in your name all her life? Were you not concerned?

AMBEDKAR: You have touched a raw nerve.

CLOWN: Have I done wrong?

AMBEDKAR: My friend, you have opened my eyes to the burning truth about my married life. How can I say you've done wrong? Of the twenty-four hours in each day, I couldn't spare even half-an-hour for my Ramu. She had to endure much suffering with my poverty-filled life and the five children she bore me. None except one survived. But that one too was so weak, we were afraid he would simply stop being one day. And then, her worry on my account. She watched over me with the eyes of a hawk. So afraid was she that people who were crazed with anger against me might do something terrible out on the streets that she once insisted on going out with me. She said, 'Rather than sit at home worrying about you, I have decided to accompany you wherever you go.' I opposed the idea but she would not give it up. Finally we had such a terrible showdown…

CLOWN: What? You quarrelled with Ramabai?

AMBEDKAR: Yes, like any common man.

CLOWN: I don't understand you great men. Gandhiji also quarrelled with Kasturba and in the heat of anger was ready to throw her out of the house. I don't understand how these men who fight to win justice for the world quarrel like common men with their near and dear ones. Man remains basically common, very common, full of weaknesses, however knowledgeable he might become with learning and reading. May I ask you one thing Doctor-saheb?

AMBEDKAR: Go ahead, ask.

CLOWN: You are highly educated. You went to America to gain the latest knowledge available. You made frequent visits to England, collected thousands of books. You studied architecture to build a house in Dadar's Hindu Colony to hold your books and called it Rajagriha. You became known as the great scholar who builds a house for books. Did you never feel that your wife should read those books, that she too should acquire knowledge and stand shoulder to shoulder with you in your struggle?

AMBEDKAR: What makes you think I didn't?

CLOWN: You don't have to answer my question if you don't wish to.

AMBEDKAR: Of course I wanted my wife to study and acquire knowledge. But she felt so oppressed by her own limited capacity and my poverty-ridden life that she barely managed to learn to read and write. My son Yeshwant and nephew Mukunda also disappointed me. Around me too I see darkness.

CLOWN: Despite your high idealism, high education, being at the very pinnacle of knowledge…

AMBEDKAR: But what can I do if my heirs have turned out to be useless? People must feel strongly from within that unless they educate themselves their lives will not change for the better.

(*A voice comes from a distance.* GANDHI: *Why should education be given so much importance? None of my three sons ever stepped into a school.*)

My friend, you are not paying attention to what I'm saying.

CLOWN: Doctor-saheb did you hear something?

AMBEDKAR: Of course. I heard what I was saying.

CLOWN: No, another voice?

(GANDHI: *My sons…*)

CLOWN: Listen.

(GANDHI: *My sons never stepped into a school and yet they are no less as human beings.*)

AMBEDKAR: Sorry. I can't hear a thing.

CLOWN: It's a distant voice, very sonorous, like something rising out of a deep valley.

AMBEDKAR: From a deep valley? There is only one voice like that in the country today. Mr Gandhi's.

(GANDHI: *I couldn't educate my sons but I don't think I have failed in my duties nor do I suffer remorse.*)

CLOWN: Yes. This is most definitely Gandhi's voice. His inner voice.

(*The* CLOWN *hurries away.*)

AMBEDKAR: (*to himself*) Inner voice! The magic of this voice has bewitched even the finest minds of the country. When this inner voice begins to hum and sing mysteriously, the most knowledgeable people become hypnotized, so what can we expect from ordinary people? The spectacle of the inner voice can always be staged to draw crowds; but it won't help society move even a fraction of an inch forward. The day people discover this will be a happy day for this country.

(*The stage darkens. When the lights come up,* GANDHI *is seen spinning on his charkha while the* CLOWN *watches in admiration.*)

GANDHI: People ask me why I didn't educate my sons. Would it have been wrong for them to be called to the bar like me? I see no worth in the thinking behind this question. My eldest son Harilal was obsessed with education and ruined himself.

I have always felt that the sad end he came to was an echo of my own immature past.

CLOWN: Are these the words of a highly educated barrister?

GANDHI: I must not desire for my sons what other people's sons do not get. There's no reason why I couldn't have educated my children. But then they would not have learnt the lessons they did about freedom and self-respect. When it comes to choosing between the knowledge of letters and self-respect, self-respect wins each time.

CLOWN: You mean the knowledge of letters that acquainted you with the meaning of freedom which in turn led to your untiring efforts to free this enslaved country, is itself to be exiled from life? If that is done, armies of ignorant illiterates will be raised in this land.

GANDHI: I applied to my sons the same rules that governed others. To strengthen the freedom movement in this country, I said to the youth, 'It is better to be illiterate and hew stones in the open streets than to live in slavery and acquire the knowledge of letters.'

CLOWN: The principle of a common rule for everyone is good. But does freedom mean enmity with the knowledge of letters? Would it not have been possible to fight the British while acquiring education? Could not both knowledge and freedom have been won together? After all, Dr Ambedkar continues to study without respite and still fights a tough battle for human freedom.

GANDHI: I have a suspicion that you are…

CLOWN: Suspicion? About me? Once suspicion makes a home in a person's mind, it is the end of the game. Your suspicious nature made Kasturba's life a torture. If she went out anywhere without telling you, even if it was to the temple, you became suspicious. The root of your suspiciousness about her lay in your sexual desires. You would feel that you should teach Kasturba to read and write. But when the time came

to do so, your sexual desire would get the better of you. If you had been able to control yourself even to a small degree, Kasturba would have gained an education. Perhaps you were scared of her overtaking you. What was true in your private life was equally true in your political life. You were suspicious of every person who came before you. It was because of this suspiciousness that you attempted to be one up on Dr Ambedkar and turned Jinnah into your enemy. Your mind was full of suspicion about every person who did not agree with your opinion.

GANDHI: Your guess might even be right, dear Clown. I don't deny it. And what's the point in denial anyway? But tell me one thing. Is there anybody in this world of such shining virtue that you can trust every word he says? That is probably why my inner voice inspired me to live the life of truth. I experimented with satyagraha because I was committed to nonviolence. I accepted celibacy to overcome my sexual desires and when events occurred against my wishes, I chose to fast as penance. But what did all this lead to in the end? People regarded every one of these experiments with deep suspicion. I learned only one lesson from this. The votary of truth should never let anything disturb him. Even this appearance of mine was criticized by people. The 'half-naked fakir' they called me. What did I lack? I was a barrister. If I had practised law I would have lived a life of comfort and joy. But I denied all that. The ignorant illiterate people of the village don't have enough clothing even to cover their shame. I took an oath that I would dress only in a loincloth for as long as my brothers were not fully dressed. Even the cloth I wore had to be woven from yarn spun on this charkha. This loincloth, my rosary and Ram's name on my lips—they are all the same.

CLOWN: How? The charkha is an instrument for spinning yarn. The rosary and the name of Ram are religious symbols. Yet,

you, a political man, say all of them are one?

GANDHI: I must say that the man who believes there is no connection between religion and politics has not understood the meaning of religion. I am a politician and the charkha is the rosary by which I attain concentration. The charkha is a part of truth and that is why I see in it the form of God as Truth.

CLOWN: This mystical talk of yours! So be it. For you the charkha is the string of beads for chanting Ram's name. But I doubt whether chanting Ram's name will save this country.

GANDHI: Ram's name alone will save this country. I know the power of Ram's name. The kingdom of Ram is my dream. I will bring it into reality.

CLOWN: The kingdom of Ram?

GANDHI: You, whose thoughts run on the single path of antagonism, remember that you can look at any given thing from seven viewpoints, and each one of them brings home a truth. Do try to think from my viewpoint some day!

CLOWN: How can I do that? Perhaps a great soul like you is able to look at everything not only from seven angles but seventeen. But I still feel the kingdom of Ram is not a thing. The kingdom of Ram is a state that belonged to a particular time aeons ago. Times have changed. How can the kingdom of Ram come into being now? Can we turn back the wheel of time? If the attempt is made, stubbornly, someone like me would still have a question. What will the Ram in your kingdom of Ram be like? Will he be fully clothed, adequately fed and have the protection of at least a hut if not a house? What will your Ram be like, tell me. One who takes care of Sita or one who falls victim to a dhobi's words? One who gives Shambuka the right to study or one who champions the rule of brahmins?

(GANDHI *smiles mildly. He writes something on his slate. He hands the slate to the* CLOWN. *The* CLOWN *reads—'Monday has begun. My oath of silence begins.' Lights dim gradually. When they come up…*)

CLOWN: Riot, riot, get up, run, save your religion, the Hindu religion is in danger. How can you be so indifferent? Have you not heard Dr Ambedkar's declaration of conversion? 'I was born a Hindu, but I will not die as one.' What did you say? You don't care? Don't you know, the entire country is in turmoil because of Dr Ambedkar's declaration? Some say he will become a Sikh. Others that he will become Christian. Some say he will become Buddhist and others say he'll become Muslim. Gandhiji is so dejected with the news that he has asked Dr Ambedkar to come and see him immediately. There he comes. (AMBEDKAR *enters*) Come, come, Doctor-saheb. Gandhiji is waiting for you. Come…

(*The* CLOWN *escorts* AMBEDKAR *to* GANDHI.)[1]

GANDHI: I'm so happy you have come.

AMBEDKAR: Your invitation was so urgent that I had to come. Your eternal supporter, Sheth Walchand Hirachand, has been after me about this, saying you are extremely disturbed by my declaration to convert.

GANDHI: You know well enough how anxious I am on behalf of the fifth varna. And just as untouchability is in the throes of death, you declare your plan to convert. This is most unfortunate.'

AMBEDKAR: It is very strange that my declaration should be seen as unfortunate. You were the one who, when I was demanding a separate electorate, roared, 'Let the untouchables convert to Islam or Christianity, but I will not grant them a separate electorate.' I am amazed at this. Gandhiji, it is impossible that my people's lot will ever improve if they stay within the Hindu fold.

GANDHI: Religion is not like a garment that you can change at will. More than a person's body, it is his soul, and an integral part of him.

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[1] Dr Ambedkar declared his intention to convert at the Yeola Depressed Classes Conference in 1935, and this meeting took place in 1936.

AMBEDKAR: I grant that. But I do not think it is necessary to stick to a religion just because it belonged to your ancestors.

GANDHI: I will not heed illiterate, innocent harijans, however large in number, who have abandoned the religion of their ancestors. We must understand that their interests or otherwise are inextricably linked with those of touchable Hindus.

AMBEDKAR: I have made my decision to convert after due consideration.

GANDHI: You will not get what you want by converting.

AMBEDKAR: Why not? The Gandhiji who was already fighting for the untouchables even before I was born must tell me once and for all what I will gain by doing what. And this too he must tell me—who am I? Am I a human being? Why should I not convert? Because when I was a young boy I drank water from the upper caste well for which they beat me black and blue worse than cattle? Should I not convert because I was made to sit apart from the others at school? Should I not convert because even the teachers would not ask me questions for fear of being polluted? I struggled to get my education. I won a scholarship from Sayajirao Gaikwad, the Maharaja of Baroda. When I started my job with him in accordance with the agreement I had signed, the touchable peon in the office would fling files at me from a distance. Is that why I should not convert? When I became a lecturer at Sydenham College, a place where the most highly educated people worked, my drinking water was stored separately from theirs. Is that why I shouldn't convert? When I was in Raigad on a holiday, the touchable Hindus there assaulted me for polluting Shivaji's fort. Is it especially for those Hindus that I ought not to convert?

GANDHI: Dr Ambedkar, please.

AMBEDKAR: When my wife heard of the assault on me at Raigad, she was so terrified that she fell ill and didn't rise from her

bed again till her death. Particularly for my beloved wife, I should never think of abandoning the Hindu religion. She said once, let's go to Pandharpur. I said...

GANDHI: ...you said what can we expect from Pandharpur where devotees are pushed far away from the image of god? Let us together establish another Pandhari with our good deeds, sacrifice and service.

AMBEDKAR: Yes. Another Pandhari. Our own, by right. Where one human being will not say to another, stand far away from me.

GANDHI: I can understand your grief Dr Ambedkar.

AMBEDKAR: You can?

GANDHI: It happened when I was living in South Africa. I was travelling in the first class compartment. A white man entered and asked me to vacate my seat. When I didn't budge, he called for a soldier and had my luggage thrown out of the train. I was pushed out after it. Why? Because I was an Indian. Black. I was a highly educated barrister. But in that country I was considered a coolie. It was hurtful. Dr Ambedkar, I can understand your grief.

AMBEDKAR: I am grateful to you for that. And yet, one is obliged to find some solution to alleviate that grief.

GANDHI: Conversion is not the answer. Truly it isn't.

AMBEDKAR: Very well. We'll put conversion aside and destroy the root from which this distance between man and man has risen. I find the four varna system revolting. There is no other social system in the world that is as base and abhorrent. Every Hindu will have to forget the very words brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya, shudra. All the scriptures which uphold the supremacy of brahmins will have to be destroyed. That is why, if you remember, I publicly burned the *Manusmriti* in Mahad a few years ago.

GANDHI: I will never destroy brahmins and allow nonbrahmins to take their place. The brahmin must always be our guru.

AMBEDKAR: If that is so, it is impossible to bring about any reform. Anything we do that is founded on caste is bound to collapse. We will not be able to found a nation. You say the brahmin must be our guru. But compared to brahmins in Maharashtra and the south, those in the north and central provinces of the country are generally considered to be of a lower social status. They are mostly water servers and cooks.

GANDHI: I do not believe that caste has anything to do with religion. Caste is a custom.

AMBEDKAR: If that is so, can you tell me how it came into being?

GANDHI: I have no idea of how caste was born. Nor do I feel the need to know it for my spiritual growth. The varna system has worked for the welfare of human beings in binding them to ancestral trades and establishing that no work is low or high. There is no difference between the brahmin who gives spiritual knowledge and the bhangi who scavenges. It is the duty of the brahmin to look after the cleansing of human souls, and of the bhangi to look after the cleansing of human bodies. Both stand to gain equal merit if they perform their duty in the right way.

AMBEDKAR: Gandhiji, sir, do not take offence if I mention your caste since I am out to break the system itself. You are a vaishya by birth, ancestrally a grocer. When it came to choosing your profession, you set aside the weighing scales, and picked up your law books and became a barrister. You never practised your ancestors' business. If you insist that people should practise the trades of their forefathers, you are suggesting that the sons of pimps should be pimps and the daughters of prostitutes, prostitutes.

GANDHI: Look here Dr Ambedkar. If you are going to say things like this…

AMBEDKAR: Did my words sting you? Perhaps you also felt that, instead of looking after the borders of the village as is his duty, this Ambedkar… But remember, I have not been anointed a

Mahatma who will think one thing and say something else. I like straightforward, honest people. The day your opinion of me clears up, send for me. I will come running as I did today. (*Prepares to leave*)

CLOWN: Are you going Doctor-saheb?

AMBEDKAR: What else can I do?

CLOWN: I think the purpose for which Gandhiji called you has been completely sidelined.

AMBEDKAR: His only purpose was to prevent me from converting. But he has made no progress with regard to that.

GANDHI: If you doubt my purpose, what can I do to satisfy you?

AMBEDKAR: Should I not doubt the purpose of a Mahatma who believes that the work of a brahmin and a bhangi is equally meritorious?

GANDHI: I believe completely in varnashram dharma. I do not accept your idea of uprooting it and annihilating it. The varnashram religion does not support untouchability. I feel if we worked together, it would be possible for us to abolish it. And yet you suspect my motives. What then should I do to satisfy you?

AMBEDKAR: What can that Mahatma do to satisfy me who is himself afraid?

GANDHI: What was that you said? I am afraid?

AMBEDKAR: Yes. You are afraid.

GANDHI: I am fighting the British fearlessly for the sake of the country's freedom. In the salt satyagraha, I refused to drop that pinch of salt in my fingers even when I was being bloodied with beating. The whole world knows that I have not been afraid of anything throughout my life. I reject the idea that I am afraid.

AMBEDKAR: Gandhiji, you are afraid. I know of whom and why. You are afraid of the brahmins. Caste discrimination is the spine of Hinduism. I have set out to break that very spine and usher in a one-caste society. But I know you will not cooperate

with me on this mission, because the moment you do, the brahmins whose social position has been inviolate solely because of the caste system, will instantly call your leadership and your entitlement to the title of Mahatma into question. You know very well that in this country, whatever brahmins endorse is endorsed mindlessly by the people. The brahmins are fully aware that a vaishya is leading the people including brahmins. But for as long as you look after the interests of brahmins with all your spirit, no harm will come to your title. I don't need to elaborate on what your position will amount to if you ever dare harm the interests of brahmins. (*Pause.*) You asked me to come here to try and convince me that I should not convert. Many others feel the same way as you. I will tell you what I have told all those others. Lokmanya Tilak who edited the *Kesari* newspaper...

GANDHI: I know who edited *Kesari*.

AMBEDKAR: You are an heir to his politics. In the opinion of the *Kesari*, a matang caste gentleman by the name of K.K. Sakat, is an ideal Hindu. Let Mr Sakat sit on the Shankaracharya's seat for a year. As a sign that hearts have changed and social equality has been established, let a hundred brahmin families touch Mr Sakat's feet and so prove that untouchability does not have a place in our society. Then I will not even think about conversion. Goodbye. (*Goes*)

CLOWN: Doctor-saheb! Doctor-saheb, Gandhiji's purpose... (*He runs out after* AMBEDKAR. GANDHI *falls into deep thought.*) Let Mr Sakat sit on the Shankaracharya's seat for a year ... let a hundred brahmin families touch Mr Sakat's feet. The brahmins are fully aware that a vaishya is leading the people, including brahmins. For as long as you look after the interests of the brahmins with all your spirit, no harm will come to your Mahatmahood. The day you dare harm the interests of brahmins...

(GANDHI *is like a man caught in a tempest.*)

PAUSE

(*The* CLOWN *is trying to sleep with the globe beside him. He tosses and turns but to no avail. He sits up.*)

CLOWN: Disgusting. Such heavenly silence but no sleep. Not even a wink or two. It has never happened before that I have lain down on my bed and sleep has not come. I've been tossing and turning all night but no sleep. Not even a scratch on the back of this silence. At other times I have heard the breath of night in its silence. But today I cannot hear even that. Nights are for the love calls of cats and dogs and owls too. But not a single sound breaks the silence tonight. It has never happened that dawn has broken without the crowing of the cock. But today no cock has crowed. What's going on? What magic is this that has made everybody hold their breath? The only magic that can make even the greatest of men hold their breath is the Mahatma … Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. If the British will not leave this country when he has said 'Quit India', nor have they gone with the declaration of intention, 'Do or die', what is the Mahatma to do? Just one thing—fast. The minute he utters that word, the country freezes. What's going to become of this old man? He's in his seventies and declares a twenty-one–day fast. If Gandhiji's 'do' in this case leads to 'die', what then?

(AMBEDKAR'S *voice*: *'Gandhi's call of "Do or die" is irresponsible and stupid.'*)

That does it. Now our sleep will be destroyed forever. This is surely Dr Ambedkar's voice. Has it ever happened that Gandhiji has declared something and Ambedkar hasn't commented on it?

(*The* CLOWN *tosses up the globe. Darkness. Lights.* AMBEDKAR *is revealed. It is 1942.*)

AMBEDKAR: Gandhiji's call of 'Do or die' is irresponsible and stupid. It is a sign of his political acumen having gone bankrupt. It is an attempt to restore the position that the Congress

has lost since the Second World War began. It is madness to weaken the law and order of the country when the enemy is at the door waiting to enter and rule India.

CLOWN: Madness? That Mahatma has put his life on the line to free the country from British slavery? The whole country is worried about what will happen to him, and you…

AMBEDKAR: What did you say? The whole country?

CLOWN: Why? Is this not your country?

AMBEDKAR: What do you think? It belongs to Gandhiji alone?

CLOWN: Then do you not feel like fighting for its freedom?

AMBEDKAR: Are you implying that I want this country to remain enslaved to the British?

CLOWN: Isn't it so? And yet you accuse of madness those who fight for the country. You call Gandhiji's action irresponsible and stupid? Are you repaying the British for the favour they've shown you in making you Labour Minister in their government?

AMBEDKAR: So I'm a stooge of the British?

CLOWN: Doctor-saheb I was only trying to say…

AMBEDKAR: I know exactly what's going on in your mind. I know that Gandhiji's followers and Congress supporters curse me all the time. If I am a stooge of the British what are the others in the cabinet like Madhavrao Aney, Homi Modi, and J.P. Srivastav? But nobody says a word against them. Remember, I have never prostrated myself before anybody. I entered the British cabinet to fulfill the goals I had in mind. I wanted an employment exchange to be started for recruitment, maternity leave to be sanctioned for working mothers, the number of hours in a shift to be regulated, wages to match hours of work … I had to get so many things done for the welfare of workers. The day I see that these goals are not likely to be won, I will quit my post without a second thought.

CLOWN: Even then, when the entire country is fighting against the British…

AMBEDKAR: The entire country? The Muslims oppose Gandhiji's Quit India movement. Even the Hindu Mahasabha has distanced itself from it. Yet you claim that the whole country is agitating. If the whole country were agitating, why then did the movement come to a standstill in fifteen days?

CLOWN: Repression by government. They jailed thousands of people. They shot hundreds. They imprisoned all the leaders.

AMBEDKAR: What should the government have done then? Five hundred post offices were destroyed and a hundred and fifty police chowkies attacked during this agitation. Thirty policemen, officers and soldiers were killed. Public life was thrown into chaos. Was the government to keep quiet even when its work was about to come to a stop? The government is the government—whoever runs it. Had Gandhiji, Jinnah, Savarkar or you been running it, the result would have been the same. But that doesn't mean there is any disagreement between us about driving the British out of the country.

CLOWN: Despite which you two don't come together.

AMBEDKAR: That's because of Gandhiji's stubborn nature. His suspiciousness. Moreover, if he insists that power should go only to the Congress and he should be hailed as the sole inspiration behind the freedom struggle, then…

CLOWN: What a glorious opportunity this is. Such an opportunity will never come again. There's a World War going on in which the British are being routed. If we do not strike while our enemy is in difficulties…

AMBEDKAR: The difficulties of the British cannot become an opportunity for us. The British are our enemy, sure. But then who is our friend? The Germans who attacked Poland? Is Hitler, the promoter of a dictatorship, our friend? The Second World War is a war between fascism and democracy, and fascism does not stand on any moral foundation. It is supported by racial pride. Nazism poses an enormous threat to the future of mankind. We must devote all effort to ensure

that democracy, which is at pains to forge links between human beings across the world, should not be destroyed. We should think of the welfare of our country within that context.

CLOWN: Welfare of the country? But you are saying, give Pakistan away to the Muslims. Divide the country. You have said, 'The idea that we are all Indians has still not taken root in our minds. In my opinion it is a crime to allow our pride in regional and cultural identity and patriotism to run riot just as this idea of Indianness is taking hold. Let us grant that Pakistan is a separate country without putting it to pointless debate.' These are your thoughts. Are you an enemy of the country?

AMBEDKAR: I, an enemy of this country? I have never looked upon anyone as my enemy and time will decide whether I am a friend or foe of this country. Even then, let me point out the reality to you. Democracy does not inspire Muslims. Their only concern is for their religion. They are opposed to reform and their ideas are regressive. They have contempt for non-Muslims and have faith only in nations run by Muslims. I have placed my understanding of the situation before the government. The country should decide what to do with it.

CLOWN: But whose hands are you strengthening by your statements? To create Pakistan is precisely Jinnah's dream. In fact, this is the time to make Gandhiji's hands stronger.

AMBEDKAR: I feel strongly that a unity brought about by force will act as an obstacle to progress. Every hope that India has from its freedom will turn hollow. If we want a strong central government, let the country be divided. Otherwise we will face terrible consequences. India will never be one.

CLOWN: But Gandhiji wants an undivided Hindustan and nothing less.

AMBEDKAR: Anybody who hopes for such a thing is headed for deep disappointment.

CLOWN: This is the problem—you create confusion with your

opinions. It is difficult to understand exactly what goes on in your mind. Is it engaged in some evil political game?

AMBEDKAR: What was that you said? Evil political game in my mind?

CLOWN: Yes. You assert that the untouchables are a separate entity.

AMBEDKAR: Why assert? They are. And the touchables have proved it by their conduct.

CLOWN: So that makes them like the Muslims who also consider themselves a separate entity.

AMBEDKAR: Correct.

CLOWN: You also consider yourself a separate entity.

AMBEDKAR: Correct.

CLOWN: You say give away Pakistan to the Muslims

AMBEDKAR: Correct.

CLOWN: Once Pakistan is given to the Muslims, your path is clear.

AMBEDKAR: My path?

CLOWN: An independent state for untouchables. Dalitasthan. (AMBEDKAR *roars with laughter.*) Your evil game is to help the formation of Pakistan and gain Dalitasthan. (AMBEDKAR *is still laughing.*) You sound happy.

AMBEDKAR: Very happy. You silly man, here I am trying to abolish the four-fold varna system so we can work towards an equal society. Would I be the one to parade Dalitasthan as a victory?

CLOWN: Is that so? In that case this land should be eternally grateful.

AMBEDKAR: All my thoughts have been concentrated only on this land.

CLOWN: And yet you ask your people not to worship Hindu gods and goddesses.

AMBEDKAR: Why should I believe in them for as long as Sakat is not made pontiff of the Shankaracharya seat, and a hundred brahmins don't prostrate themselves at his feet? It is six years

since I mentioned this to Gandhiji. But he has not stirred in the matter nor will he. Because he does not wish to hurt the brahmins. I also know full well that a dalit will never be made pontiff, even if he is qualified to be so anointed.

CLOWN: So your decision to convert remains firm?

AMBEDKAR: It is important to be able to live a life of self-respect.

CLOWN: But which religion? Islam, Christiantiy or Buddhism? Why are you suddenly serious? Tell me which religion.

AMBEDKAR: I will decide after thorough consideration.

CLOWN: Surely you have some idea?

AMBEDKAR: Yes. And I will convert publicly.

CLOWN: But to which religion? And will conversion solve all the problems of the untouchables? Or will they fall from the frying pan into the fire? Tell me.

AMBEDKAR: Do you want me to divulge all that goes on in my mind?

CLOWN: Forget it. Don't tell me.

AMBEDKAR: What's this? You're cross with me. Look, a politician should never tell the whole truth.

CLOWN: I've realized that. Politics is all about power. Everybody has opened a power shop. Gandhiji for the Congress, Jinnah for the Muslim League, Savarkar for the Hindu Mahasabha.... Each one is lying in wait to grab political power. And Doctor-saheb, your aim is no different.

AMBEDKAR: But of course, my friend. If this country is to become independent, how would it do for us to be sidelined? How can this country be free when we remain enslaved? We must have the same rights as everybody else. My community must become political.

CLOWN: A political community! I find this a bit extreme. Will power and engaging in politics alone make the community wise? There are so many other things, like literature, science, music, sculpture, dance, history, commerce, which help a community to grow.

AMBEDKAR: But for that the stomach must be full to begin with. Hunger is satisfied with money. And money is in the coffers of the government. That money must come into the hands of my people. The most ordinary of human beings in this country must be enabled to live a happy life. Each one must have food, clothes, shelter. Women must get education. They must be empowered. For this to happen, society must move forward constantly and stay away from Gandhism. The revival of rural life is Gandhism. To live like animals is Gandhism. Not to feel any concern for economic equality is Gandhism. False superstitions and illusory ideas is … are you listening? Or have you fallen asleep?

CLOWN: (*wakes up with a start*) No of course not. I was thinking with my eyes closed. I was wondering if Gandhism is so totally fruitless, what fruits will Ambedkarism bear?

AMBEDKAR: Once man is made aware of his enslavement, he will rise up in revolt. He will come wide awake. Then he will begin to wonder who or what brought him to this state in the first place.

CLOWN: Then?

AMBEDKAR: Man will then decide for himself whether or not to become the sculptor of his own destiny.

CLOWN: Meanwhile, what about Gandhiji's life? What about his fast?

AMBEDKAR: His life is not in my hands. When it was, I saved him. I sacrificed the future of my people's welfare and saved it. And truly, there is nothing for you to worry about. Nothing's going to happen to Gandhiji. It's a question of only twenty-one days. He's used to long fasts.

CLOWN: But this Mahatma—why does he keep fasting and risking his life?

AMBEDKAR: What can I say? Only Gandhiji can tell what goes on in his mind. But I wonder if even he would be able to tell.

CLOWN: Why not? Why would he not be able to say?

AMBEDKAR: My dear man, this concerns Gandhiji's inner voice. It is first his inner voice that tells him why he must fast. Then he must consult his inner voice about whether to tell people why he's fasting. If his inner voice gives him the signal to go ahead, he will tell us, 'my inner voice has told me that…' (*The* CLOWN *suddenly sits down.*)

AMBEDKAR: Why? What's the matter?

CLOWN: My inner voice tells me that if I continue to listen to stories about inner voices I will go mad. And mad is what I don't want to become.

(*The* CLOWN *tosses the globe. The stage darkens. When the lights come up,* AMBEDKAR *and* GANDHI *are standing apart.* GANDHI *looks happy.* AMBEDKAR *looks worried.*)

CLOWN: Oh great. But who do I go to first? To happy-faced Gandhiji or worry-sick Dr Ambedkar? A friend in need is a friend indeed. That's what people believe. But what's wrong if I go to Gandhiji first? Seniority always counts. (*The* CLOWN *goes to* GANDHI *who is in the midst of singing 'Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram…'*)

CLOWN: Greetings Mahatmaji. (GANDHI *motions to him to sit.*) It's the first time I am seeing you in such a jolly mood.

GANDHI: I am also seeing myself this way for the first time. Raghupati Raghav…

CLOWN: The reason for your happiness?

GANDHI: Ishwar Allah tero naam…. It is by god's grace that this happy day has dawned.

CLOWN: Are the British leaving this country?

GANDHI: No.

CLOWN: Has Jinnah given up his demand for Pakistan?

GANDHI: No.

CLOWN: So what's the reason?

GANDHI: Guess. Try.

CLOWN: Your life is so crowded with events. (*Plays with the globe. Then within a moment…*) Surely it isn't because Dr Ambedkar's

party has been routed in the Legislative Assembly elections?

GANDHI: Your guess is absolutely right. Why have you turned suddenly serious?

CLOWN: You don't think Dr Ambedkar's loss is a serious matter?

GANDHI: Should I not exult at the defeat of a man who has harassed me for the last sixteen years? Should I not exult at his defeat when he has been roaring against Gandhism and has strengthened the Muslim cause by urging us to accept Pakistan?

CLOWN: What in heaven's name has come over you Gandhiji?

GANDHI: The fifth varna is an indivisible part of the Hindu faith. But this man has been constantly at pains to ambush me over the issue. He writes to me saying, 'If the country's political goal is to be achieved, a solution must be found for the question of untouchability along with one for the Hindu–Muslim problem.'

CLOWN: Is there something wrong with that?

GANDHI: See, this question is not merely political. It is religious as well.

CLOWN: Is it? In that case one would have to say that those who claim religion has nothing to do with politics haven't understood what religion is.

GANDHI: Don't you throw my thoughts back at me. Dr Ambedkar must give up thinking of the fifth varna as a separate entity. Unless he does so, I...

CLOWN: So you have still not forgotten the insult you had to suffer during the Poona Pact debate.

GANDHI: I paid a very big price then.

CLOWN: Why don't you take the same position with Jinnah that you do with Ambedkar? Tell Jinnah he will not get Pakistan.

GANDHI: I am certain I will be able to persuade Jinnah to think that way.

CLOWN: Jinnah is telling the whole world that Pakistan is a separate nation. You think he's going to give a damn for your

requests? Why do you keep going to meet him? Your meetings with him are taken as an insult by Hindus. All these centuries we've lived together in the same land. Why are there riots all of a sudden now? For centuries Hindus lived under Moghul rule and Muslims lived under the Hindu king Shivaji's rule. So why has this shadow of communal riots fallen on us now? A hunk of pig flesh is found before a masjid, a hunk of cow flesh before a temple, and off they go, the Muslims and the Hindus, gouging lumps of flesh out of each other. Why do you not explain to them that religion is not polluted with pig flesh nor is it destroyed by cow flesh? You are neither Muslim nor Hindu. You are the Mahatma. You call yourself the representative of Hindus, Muslims and the fifth varna. Then why do you not understand Savarkar who represents the Hindus, Jinnah who represents the Muslims and Dr Ambedkar who represents the fifth varna? Ambedkar's defeat made you happy. But Jinnah's Muslim League is still alive. Dr Ambedkar would have been useful when the time came to set up the committee for drafting the Constitution and for maintaining the integrity of the nation. Unlike Jinnah who wants an independent nation, Ambedkar isn't asking for one. All he wants is equal rights. You say you feel concern for the fifth varna, your dear harijans, and yet, instead of opening your arms to Ambedkar, you spend your time appeasing Jinnah. Why?

GANDHI: What did you say? I appease Jinnah? I pamper Jinnah?

CLOWN: Decide that for yourself. I'm off.

(*The* CLOWN *leaves.* GANDHI *sits alone, deep in thought.*)

GANDHI: Yes, I have experienced this in South Africa too that there is no love lost between Hindus and Muslims. It is also true that I have never wasted a single opportunity to try and destroy the enmity between them. How was I to know that I would have to continue doing in India what I had done in South Africa? I still remember that moment of meeting the leaders of the Khilafat Movement, the Ali brothers. I decided

then and there that Hindus and Muslims must come together. Just as I was beginning to see success, the moplas of Malabar revolted. Their target was the government but the ones who were crushed were Hindus. Murders, arson, loot and rape. But I did not as much as protest. Why? Because that would displease the Muslims? Perhaps. It was as if there was a competition between the Ali brothers, Jinnah and me to become the real leaders of the Muslims. Jinnah was wounded in this competition and was alienated forever. He left the Congress and joined the Muslim League. When I said to him that the two parties must cooperate for the integrity and freedom of the country, he said, 'I have not heard of a nation called Hindustan.' What must I have felt at that moment? My Hindu brothers put the entire blame on me. Maybe. But why doesn't anybody understand the politics of Muslim appeasement that started with the Lucknow Pact? Gokhale did not oppose the demand for a separate electorate for the Muslims. Yes, yes, the same Gokhale whom I acknowledge as my political guru. Nor was Lokmanya Tilak opposed to the idea. I received the same legacy. I walked on the very same path that they had made. Despite which I am supposed to be the appeaser of Muslims? What do I do now that will make the Hindus happy? Shall I abandon the Muslims to the winds? If I do that, they will turn to Jinnah. That would mean partition. Partition is what Jinnah wants. If partition is to be avoided, I must hold Savarkar and Ambedkar along with Muslims close to me. But that Ambedkar! In his eyes I am a vaishya. A bania. A bania who turns politics into trade. A bania who devours the interest that accrues from Mahatmahood. If the caste system is a part of the Hindu religion, why should religion not die? But will this thought appeal to the brahmins who uphold the varna system? And would I be able to forget the price I paid at the time of the Poona Pact? Will I forget the insult of being forced by a fifth

varna man to fast unto death? Would I forget the insult when my son and Kasturba had to beg him for my life? Dear god, am I truly a Mahatma or just…? Is this the result of mixing religion with politics and politics with religion? What kind of quagmire have I become trapped in?

(*The strains of 'Vaishnav jana to tene kahiye je peed parayi jaane re' are heard. As the stage darkens, lights come up on* AMBEDKAR.)

AMBEDKAR: I expected one thing and quite another happened. Such a complete rout? We fought the provincial legislative assembly elections with all our might. Because I knew that those who got elected were the ones who would be taken on the Constitution drafting committee. They would be the ones to decide what the Constitution of this country would be. But not a single one of my people got elected. What is to become of the poor and dispossessed of this country? Who will give them justice?

(*The* CLOWN *enters dancing, balancing a white cap on the tip of his finger.*)

CLOWN: Doctor-saheb, what are you thinking?

AMBEDKAR: What brings you here?

CLOWN: Thought I'd find out what you were up to.

AMBEDKAR: What can I be up to? I was sitting here quietly.

CLOWN: Lovely. Here. Take this cap.

AMBEDKAR: Cap? Chuck it away.

CLOWN: You've forgotten your pledge Doctor-saheb.

AMBEDKAR: What pledge?

CLOWN: Your pledge to join the Congress, to wear a white cap on your head if you lost the elections.

AMBEDKAR: (*laughs*) Oh that!

CLOWN: So, will you wear it?

AMBEDKAR: Really, you are the limit.

CLOWN: You will be known as the great man who lives up to his word.

AMBEDKAR: But will Gandhiji approve of my wearing this cap and joining the Congress?

CLOWN: I don't know.

AMBEDKAR: I ask because you remembered my pledge and brought the cap along. But you've forgotten. Even if I join the Congress I will put upon it the stamp of my virtues. That will make that Mahatma conspire in such a way against me that...

CLOWN: Conspire?

AMBEDKAR: What did that Mahatma do with Subhash Chandra Bose? All was well while he was Gandhiji's yes-man. But as soon as he began expressing his own opinions, Gandhi drove him away from the presidentship of the Congress. Finally, Bose had to leave the country in order to fulfil his dream.

CLOWN: Bose was a terrific man. No Tom, Dick or Harry would have hoodwinked the British and escape from their jail.

AMBEDKAR: True. It was a very courageous thing to do. But not to take the right political decision and to bow before Hitler was ... If Subhas Chandra Bose had been able to fulfil his wishes, this country would have certainly escaped the death grip of the British. But it would have fallen into the hands of Hitler, a dictator. That would have been the end of this country. Thank heavens Hitler finally died of his own accord.

CLOWN: Even then we must agree that Bose's patriotism was like a bright flame.

AMBEDKAR: Suppose Gandhiji were to discover how you felt about Bose...

CLOWN: What if he did?

AMBEDKAR: Patriotism is Gandhiji's turf. Those who do not agree with his or the Congress' opinions are not patriots.

CLOWN: Wonderful! That means you are not a patriot.

AMBEDKAR: Forget about whether I am or not, but even a snotty kid who wears this cap on his head becomes a patriot.

CLOWN: You big people—carry on with your quarrels. Tell me what you want me to do with this cap.

AMBEDKAR: You must be joking. Wear a cap with my suit? Listen.

This cap will sit perfectly on the head of one who wears a loincloth and a shoulder-cloth. Go give it to him. Putting a cap on someone's head signifies making a fool of him, right?

CLOWN: Right. So may I point out that Gandhiji has put that metaphorical cap squarely on your head? He didn't allow a single one of your candidates to win. You spent years agitating to empower the untouchables, but when it came to success…

AMBEDKAR: We worked very hard for success. But how could the votes of untouchables count against the votes of the huge majority?

CLOWN: What if you had been armed with a separate electorate whereby only untouchables would vote for untouchable candidates?

AMBEDKAR: But Gandhiji went on a fast unto death to force me to sign the Poona Pact. Additionally, our own votes were divided. Our own people have entered Gandhiji's tent. They are living on the milk of a wet nurse.

CLOWN: Where will the poor children go if the mother herself pushes them away? Let me put it frankly. In an earlier election, you did not put up a single candidate from the charmakar caste. Why not? Because they had opposed your call for conversion.

AMBEDKAR: You are absolutely right. The moment I took the decision to abandon the Hindu religion, my activists, people who were close to me, stood up against me. Please understand: they had every right to do so. But according to which moral system could I have nominated them as candidates for the elections? The Congress nominated my people to fight against my party, creating a rift between us. I did try to explain to my people, but finally I support freedom of opinion. The tragedy of this country is that people do not believe in reason. They believe in blind faith. An eccentric in any other country would have been declared insane. But here he is called Mahatma and people run after him like sheep

behind a shepherd. But that is not my problem. My problem is how are the interests of the dalits to be safeguarded. When the Constitution of this country is written…

CLOWN: I think I'll push off.

AMBEDKAR: Bored with my talk?

CLOWN: Anybody would be. You are qualified to grace any of the topmost positions in the world, but you go on and on about dalits. Don't you think that your politics is completely trapped within one community?

(AMBEDKAR *becomes very serious. He closes his eyes. He is quiet.*)

CLOWN: I'd better run from here; otherwise I'll have to hear another round of dalit, dalit.

(*The* CLOWN *leaves on tiptoe.* AMBEDKAR *remains quiet. Then he wakes up.*)

AMBEDKAR: Those are sharp words—dalit politics, caste politics. Their edge cuts deep. Really, why do I engage in dalit politics? Is it because I cannot do anything else? I must do this because I want to bring light into the life of this community which has been languishing in the dark valley of ignorance for centuries. The Clown asks a reasonable question. But it would never have occurred to him to ask it if he had been a victim of the caste system. Tell me, Clown, am I alone in playing caste politics? What liberal politics is Gandhiji playing when he says, 'I will never allow the destruction of brahmins to allow nonbrahmins to climb to the top.' Aren't the politics of keeping brahmins happy caste politics? But who is to blame whom? For as long as the Hindu religion which gives status only to one caste is alive and well in this country, there can be no politics of pure humanism. If we want a politics without caste, clean and progressive, the caste-based Hindu religion has to be destroyed. But what point is there in me alone thinking so? Clown, (*looks around*)… Oh! He's gone. I have been routed in the provincial legislative assembly elections. The one who loses is always alone.

(*The light dims slowly. People are shouting slogans outside. 'Kayde Azam Jinnah zindabad, Pakistan paindabad.'* JINNAH'S *voice rises above the din.*)

JINNAH: My Muslim friends, we are an independent nation. We must win it. Gandhi, the leader of the Hindus comes to me. He tells me not to divide the country. But it is my dream to create the sovereign nation of Pakistan. Because we Muslims are a minority. That is why we are at risk from Hindu dictatorship. We are different from Hindus in every way—in our culture, our language, our literature, our art, our morality, our history. That is why we want a separate nation for ourselves. If we do not get it, we will take charge of the whole of Hindustan. If the Congress wants war, we are ready for it. Hindustan will either be divided or destroyed. We will not rest till we have Pakistan. (*Slogans*) If we want to turn these slogans into reality, we must take direct action. (*Slogans: 'Allah-hu-Akbar', 'Har har Mahadev', 'Catch them, beat them'. Chaos*)

CLOWN: (*bewildered*) What's going on? Arson, looting, murder, rape. There's a slush of flesh and blood out there. Thousands of people screaming for their lives. Won't somebody stop those wolves? Stop all this. Direct action. Well done, Jinnah saab. You have incited the Muslims to violence in your fight for Pakistan. You've woken up the greedy monster of communal conflict in the country. Such cruelty. (*The noise rises to be replaced by the soft strains of the shehnai.*) It has arrived. Finally, independence is here. It has come riding on the notes of the shehnai. It has come announcing its arrival to the sound of tutaris. It has come singing 'Vande Mataram'. But it has come accompanied by partition. Now there are two nations, Pakistan and Bharat, but the Hindu–Muslim question remains, its jaw wide open. The clash of 'Alla-hu-Akbar' and 'Har har Mahadev' continues. And Gandhiji's fast continues to usher in peace. Oh this Mahatmahood!

(*The* CLOWN *lunges towards* GANDHI, *who is spinning yarn on the charkha. The* CLOWN *begins to bang his own head.*)

GANDHI: What are you doing? Please! You'll break your skull.

CLOWN: I hope I do.

GANDHI: What!?

CLOWN: If you don't stop this fast, I'll break my head as I stand here, and kill myself.

GANDHI: I am grateful to you for your concern.

CLOWN: But why do you put your life at risk again and again?

GANDHI: What am I supposed to do then? Calmly watch the rioting that's going on all over the country?

CLOWN: But did you not fast just a few months ago in Calcutta to stop the riots and save Muslim lives?

GANDHI: Not Muslim lives, dear Clown. Hindu lives. I panic even now when I remember those days. Riots broke out all over the country as a result of Jinnah's direct action. Suhrawardy incited the Muslims at Noakhali and the massacre of Hindus began. Thousands of Hindus were killed.

CLOWN: But when the Hindus in Calcutta wanted to avenge that massacre, you sat on a fast with Suhrawardy who had incited the Muslims in the first place.

GANDHI: The remaining Hindus in Noakhali were going to be saved only if I protected the Muslims in Calcutta.

CLOWN: Which means that you bowed down to Suhrawardy's threats.

GANDHI: I am not interested in deciding who submitted to whom. It was important to save Hindu lives and I did that.

CLOWN: But in doing so you also saved Muslim lives.

GANDHI: Is there something wrong in that?

CLOWN: That's why the Hindus are burning with revenge.

GANDHI: This cycle of revenge must stop. If the Hindus insist on taking revenge on the Muslims, then it is going to be difficult to protect the Hindus who have stayed behind in Pakistan.

CLOWN: Protect Hindus? When the whole country was

celebrating independence, Pakistan sent, as an independence gift, a whole train crammed with dead Hindu bodies.

GANDHI: The atrocities committed by Muslims are unforgivable. But does that mean Hindus should commit similar atrocities on them? And think of it, what did the Hindus not do in retaliation? Let me tell you, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, whoever they may be, they have an equal place in my heart.

CLOWN: If everybody had behaved reasonably and with restraint when the country was being partitioned, the question of saving these or those people would not have arisen.

GANDHI: What do you mean by that?

CLOWN: Every single Muslim from here should have been sent off to Pakistan and every single Hindu in Pakistan should have been brought here.

GANDHI: This is Dr Ambedkar speaking from your mouth.

CLOWN: Was his suggestion inappropriate?

GANDHI: Perhaps not. But remember this. This country called Bharat belongs to whoever was born and raised here and never once glanced at any other country but this. It belongs as much to Parsis, Jews, Christians and Muslims and all other non-Hindu communities as it does to Hindus. Independent Bharat is not a Hindu state. It is an Indian state. Bringing Hindus from Pakistan here and sending Muslims from here to Pakistan as Dr Ambedkar suggests, will be tantamount to snatching them away from their mothers.

CLOWN: So what is different now? When riots flare up, aren't people separated from their mothers? On the one hand you witness the division of the country, and on the other you tell people not to leave their homes. What kind of partition is that? You once roared, 'If this country is to be divided you'll have to cut my body in two, first.' Well, the partition has happened.

GANDHI: Yes. The country was cut into two and this body is still

whole. If you have a dagger, plunge it into me and…

CLOWN: I am not a human being to commit such a deed.

GANDHI: To whom can I speak of my pain? Who will listen to my lament? How much I pleaded, let Jinnah rule if he so wishes. Let him form the government. But do not cut the country into two. But my own people turned on me. 'How can two nations live as one. Give away Pakistan.' Greed for power brought them all together. Nehru, Patel, everybody. I was forsaken, left alone. I became unwanted. I had even less value than a bhangi.

CLOWN: So your followers took the same path as Dr Ambedkar's who was saying give Pakistan away. The man who was condemned as a traitor was declared a visionary. It's all truly amazing. I have seen Dr Ambedkar's political future hit rock bottom after the defeat in the legislative assembly elections. And before you knew what, he was a member of the drafting committee of the Constitution.

GANDHI: God's will.

CLOWN: God's will? Who knows? One thing is true though. Dr Ambedkar knew it was vital for him to be on the committee for the sake of the dalits. This was achieved with the help of the Muslim League in East Bengal. But when the country was divided, that part went to Pakistan. Ambedkar was again left without support. But then your Congress got him elected from Bombay.

GANDHI: Was that wrong? The fight doesn't end just because the country has won its freedom. In fact, that's the real testing time. Some people, confused and bewildered, proposed having experts from outside write the Constitution. I was the one who opposed that move. Why should we want a foreign expert to write our Constitution when we have with us a brilliant man of law like Dr Ambedkar who knows every nerve in the body of this land? In my opinion, that would have amounted to mental slavery.

CLOWN: But he was precisely the man you did not like. You said you had had to pay a very high price for the Poona Pact. Have you forgotten that?

GANDHI: Does a man forget a wound that has been inflicted in the very depths of his heart? But if all this is destined, what can I do? This charkha became the symbol of our struggle for freedom. From my innermost being, I wanted to see it on the tricolour. So what did this Ambedkar do? He replaced my charkha with the Ashok Chakra. And topped it with his taunts saying Gandhi's charkha is an insipid symbol of freedom. I don't deny that the carving on the Ashok Chakra is indeed appealing. But the meaning I had in mind, my message…

CLOWN: But was it right of you to declare that you would not bow to such a flag?

GANDHI: Everything is being done against my wishes. Even then, I am considered the father of the nation. A father whose very existence has been wiped out without a trace.

CLOWN: Is this fast an attempt to prove that you exist then?

GANDHI: You were the only one left not to have attacked my heart. It is good that you have committed this meritorious deed now. When your innermost being which knows the pain in your heart assaults you, why expect anything else from others? Dear God, purify people's minds. Let the riots end. Let Hindus and Muslims love one another.

CLOWN: Is this the sole aim of this fast? What about Pakistan's fifty-five crore rupees that you've been…

GANDHI: But that was agreed upon at the time of partition. If we don't give them that money now, we will lose face.

CLOWN: But won't that prove to be a problem for us? If with our money they…

GANDHI: Our money? That money belongs to Pakistan.

CLOWN: Oh all right. Their money. But the minute they have that money they will attack us. Don't forget their aggression in Kashmir.

GANDHI: I agree. But that is a question of their ethics, Pakistan's ethics.

CLOWN: Oh dear, yes! Ethics. But must we be the only ones to act ethically? You, the devotee of ethics, why don't you take a single decision that the Hindus of this country will see as being in their interests? At least give up this fast.

GANDHI: I will. I will end this fast. But the fifty-five crore rupees that we promised Pakistan at the time of partition must be returned to them. The masjids which were captured during the riots must be returned to them. The boycott against Muslims must be lifted and their safety must be guaranteed.

(*Slogans 'Mahatma Gandhi murdabad. May Gandhi die.' The* CLOWN *goes to the wing, listens, and comes back.*)

GANDHI: What's going on out there?

CLOWN: Demonstrations.

GANDHI: What are they saying? You are silent. What do they say?

CLOWN: They are saying, 'May Gandhi die. Mahatma Gandhi murdabad.'

GANDHI: Really? No other joy could match what I would feel if I were to die while doing my duty. Dear Clown, if I die of disease, don't forget to tell the world that this old man was a liar. And if somebody shoots me in my bare chest and the name of Ram escapes my lips, tell the world this man was a real Mahatma. Will you do that? Will you? Will you?

(*'Mahatma Gandhi murdabad. Long live undivided Bharat. May Mahatma Gandhi die.' The slogans grow louder. The* CLOWN, *worried, goes out, balancing the globe on his forefinger. The tension is now unbearable.*)

GANDHI: Dear god, cleanse everybody's minds.

(*The slogans change to 'Mahatma Gandhi zindabad. Long live Mahatma Gandhi'. The* CLOWN *returns, playing with the globe.*)

CLOWN: Mahatma Gandhi, you have won. You have finally won! Pakistan will be paid its fifty-five crore rupees. The masjids of the Muslims will be returned. Everybody will live in love.

You have finally humbled them. You have forced even your bitterest enemies, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh to bend. You are truly the Father of the Nation.

GANDHI: Really?

CLOWN: You can't believe it, can you? Here's the statement signed by everybody. (*Hands over the statement to* GANDHI, *who reads it with a faint smile on his face. The* CLOWN *offers him a glass of water.*) Break your fast. Lift the dark cloud that has darkened the country for the last five days. (GANDHI *takes the glass still smiling gently.*) Your fasts have brought the biggest men round to your way of thinking. This weapon must be considered one of the greatest wonders of the world. Your deeds have always gained national importance. The entire country has come to your feet in humility. This you have done again and again. You even humbled a strong, stubborn man like Dr Ambedkar with your weapon of nonviolence that defeats the enemy without shedding a single drop of blood. Why did you not use this weapon when the division of the country was being plotted? It would have shattered the British policy of divide and rule. Jinnah would have been laid low and those disciples of yours who were not willing to give you even the status of a bhangi would have fallen at your feet and the country would have remained whole. Why then did you not use that weapon precisely when it was needed most?

GANDHI: (*folds his hands*) Dear god, why did I not think of it? Why did I not think of it? Where was my inner voice? (*He mutters to himself.*)

CLOWN: Gandhiji, it is time for your prayers.

GANDHI: Unh?

CLOWN: It is prayer time. People must be waiting for you. Come.

GANDHI: Let's go.

(*Leans on the* CLOWN *for support. They leave. The stage darkens. A voice rips through the darkness.* GODSE: *'Gandhiji I bow to you for your service*

which I think was right. And for the conduct that I find inappropriate I…' Three pistol shots. GANDHI: *'Hey Ram!' Pandemonium. Voices. 'Murder, murder! Gandhiji has been assassinated!' 'Who was it?' 'A Muslim'. 'These men must be hacked down.' 'But someone said it was a Hindu.' 'A Hindu?' 'A brahmin from Pune. Nathuram Godse.' 'These brahmins must be thrashed. The bastards have become too arrogant.' The pandemonium increases. When the light comes up,* GANDHI'S *body lies in a white shroud. The charkha is by his side and the* CLOWN *sits near him, disconsolate.* AMBEDKAR *arrives with flowers in his cupped hands.)*

CLOWN: You must feel great pain as you have your last glimpse of this man who was for you as ill-omened and inauspicious as an owl. (AMBEDKAR *throws a calm glance at him. He scatters flowers on the body. He then lifts the shroud to look at the wounds.*)

AMBEDKAR: The evil man shot him directly in the heart.

CLOWN: You must be overjoyed to see that your enemy has vanished from the world. (AMBEDKAR *does not respond but walks to one side and sits down pensively.*) What are you thinking about? Go riding on an elephant distributing sugar. Celebrate. Go!

AMBEDKAR: Om mani padmeham. I submit to the Buddha in padmasan.

CLOWN: Why pretend?

AMBEDKAR: I notice you've been attacking me grievously since I came. You think my coming here is shocking given the relationship I've had with Gandhiji till now. People will think that the flowers I've scattered on his body are nothing more than crocodile tears. But I will tell you the truth. The news of Gandhiji's assassination has torn me apart. It is true that Gandhiji did me no favours. He played no part in my spiritual, moral or social growth. What I am today is entirely due to one person—Gautam Buddha. Even then I am numbed by the news of Gandhiji's assassination. I am aware that people will not believe what I say. It is true that I once said visiting Gandhiji was as unholy and inauspicious as seeing an owl. The reason was Gandhiji's behaviour during the Second

Round Table Conference. His move was aimed at making the Muslims oppose my demand for a separate electorate. His admirers get angry when I criticize him. But Gandhiji always opposed me in everything. He tried to finish me. But let that go. Finally, this is politics. It is a politics of checkmates and counter-checkmates. It is a duel to ensure that one's interests are not harmed and one's political existence not killed. Great men often do immense service to the nation. But sometimes they become huge hurdles in the path of its progress. When Cicero was told about Julius Caesar's death, he said to the messengers, 'Tell the Roman people that it is time for you to become independent.' Even as I was sorrowing over Gandhiji's death, I recalled what Cicero had said after Caesar was assassinated. Gandhiji had become a threat to this country. He had stifled freedom of thought. People had become enslaved to one great man. They will now be free of this slavery and will stand on their own feet, supported by their virtues. And yet there is a deep regret. Gandhiji's end should not have come in this tragic manner. This man, who desired to live for a hundred and twenty-five years, fasted for days and didn't die. Why should he have been killed with bullets in this cruel way? A person might see this deed as cowardly or the work of a madman. But that would not be true. This was an act of courage to fulfill a historical right. Imagine, this man was the editor of *Hindu Rashtra*. Please note: *Hindu Rashtra*. And remember one more thing. He was not acting alone. This was a conspiracy. Nathuram Godse was once part of Gandhiji's non-cooperation movement. He joined the Hindu Mahasabha later. And after that, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. His fellow conspirators were Narayan Apte and Vishnu Karkare, both chitpavan brahmins. You might say there he goes again, this Dr Ambedkar talking about caste. But how can one avoid going to the root of our reality. Every Hindu puts caste first and thinks only of his own caste

interests. That is why I had said to Gandhiji, let's destroy the caste system and establish a single caste for democracy. If you want democracy to survive you have to destroy caste. I have heard people endorse Godse's act by calling it 'Gandhi vadh'. But Gandhiji wasn't one of your mythological rakshasas to call his killing 'vadh'. It is certainly true that he was an active opponent of the concept of Hindu rashtra. In such a nation, the so-called mlecchas would not be valued even as much as a rotten stick. Gandhiji, for whatever mysterious reason, always stood in support of the Muslims. The believers in Hindu rashtra particularly could not stomach this. I had once said to Gandhiji, 'For as long as you support brahmin interests with all your life, your Mahatmahood is safe. But the day you do something that is likely to harm brahmin interests…'

(AMBEDKAR *looks at* GANDHI*'s body. A shudder of fear passes through his body like lightning.* AMBEDKAR *calms down gradually. There is a sepulchral silence.*)

CLOWN: Doctor-saheb, forgive me. I spoke very harshly to you. Please forgive me.

(AMBEDKAR *pulls the* CLOWN *into his arms and strokes his back.*)

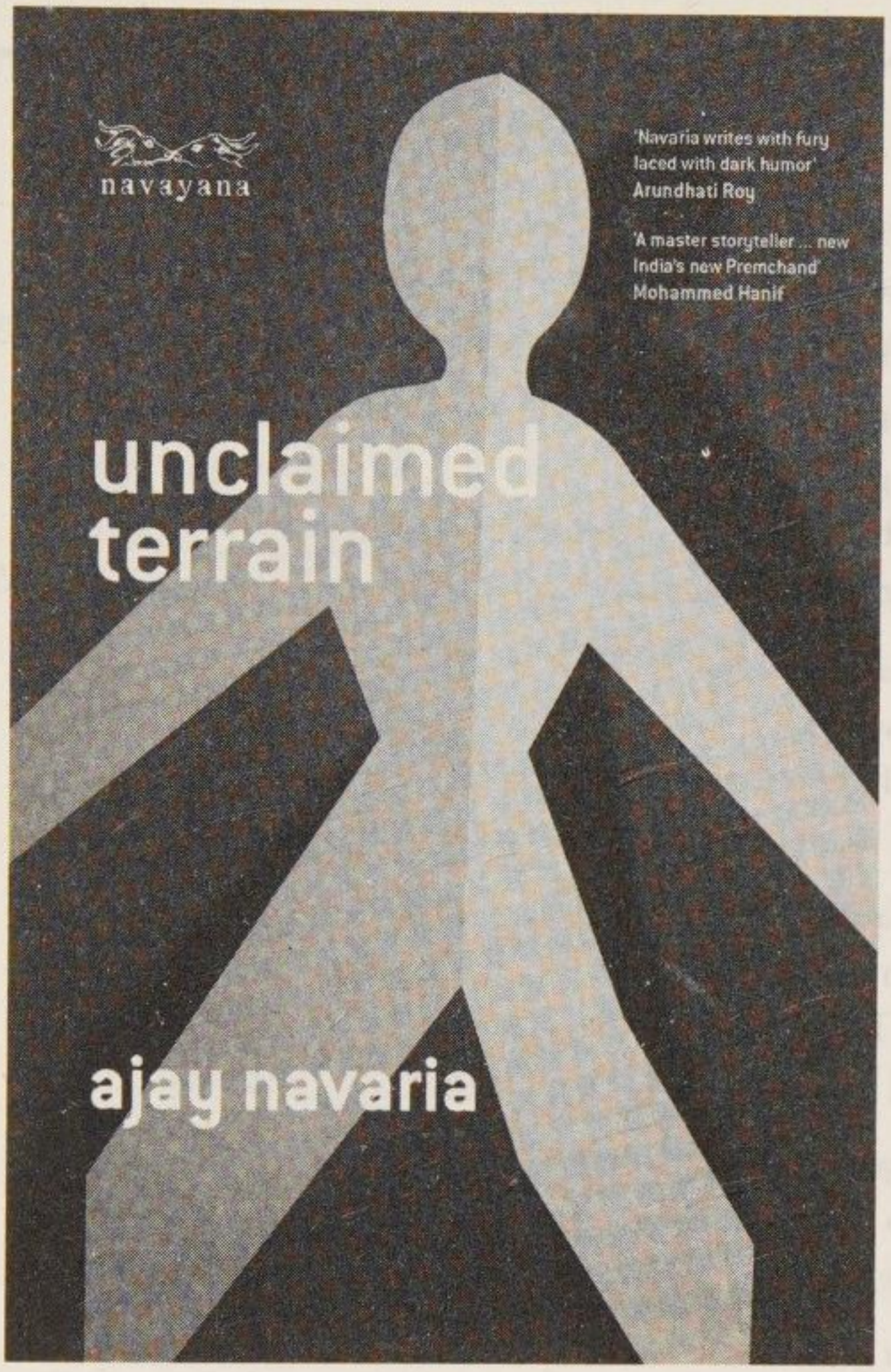
AMBEDKAR: This is only the beginning of caste-based politics. This politics which sprinkles poison between man and man must stop. It must be stopped. At once. If we want this land to stand erect in the world, with head held high, our hearts must be filled with love of the country, not love for our caste or community or ideology. Every person in this country must sacrifice caste, community, language and region to declare on oath that he his one thing alone, an Indian first and last. If this does not happen, I am afraid that these people will play the politics of caste for self-interest and let loose communal tension, riots, arson and looting, and the victims will be innocent people who have done no wrong. This must not be allowed to happen. *Om mani padmeham, om mani padmeham, om mani padmeham.*

(AMBEDKAR *bows in humility. The chant continues, increasing in volume. As the curtain falls, the* CLOWN *lunges forward.*)

CLOWN: Wait, please wait. Just one minute. (*As the curtain rises again, the stage fills with darkness. Only a single spotlight remains on the* CLOWN.)

My friends, you who ask, 'What is this thing called nation?'—do you understand now what it is? What is your relationship with history? Did I not say, dig deep into the nation, its people, its people's hearts and minds, and you will be amazed at what comes up? Truly what do you find? The things that are hidden! What did you say? To hell with history? Don't want any part of it? Don't want anything to do with Gandhi? Or Ambedkar? As you please. But why not? I think I understand. You are so cunning that you will take what is convenient and abandon what is not. But history is history. History has a thousand eyes, a thousand ears, a thousand tongues. History's voice has power. It rams through the impenetrable stone of time, uncaring about people's convenience or inconvenience. This is the time then to listen to history. Remember, those who remember history make history. Only those who remember history … wake up. Let history live. Let the nation live. Let man live. Let the universe live. Wake up. What is it that you said? I'm blabbering nonsense? Nonsense? Please, let me speak. Oh all right. I'll shut up. You are right. Who am I to tell you what you should do? Sorry. I erred. Your history is yours. Your country is yours. And the problem of what to do with them is also yours. (*The* CLOWN *comes centre-stage and puts the globe down.*) Here. (*He turns and sits with his back to the audience. The light on the globe intensifies. The music of the circus plays, but heavily—without any spirit.*)

CURTAIN



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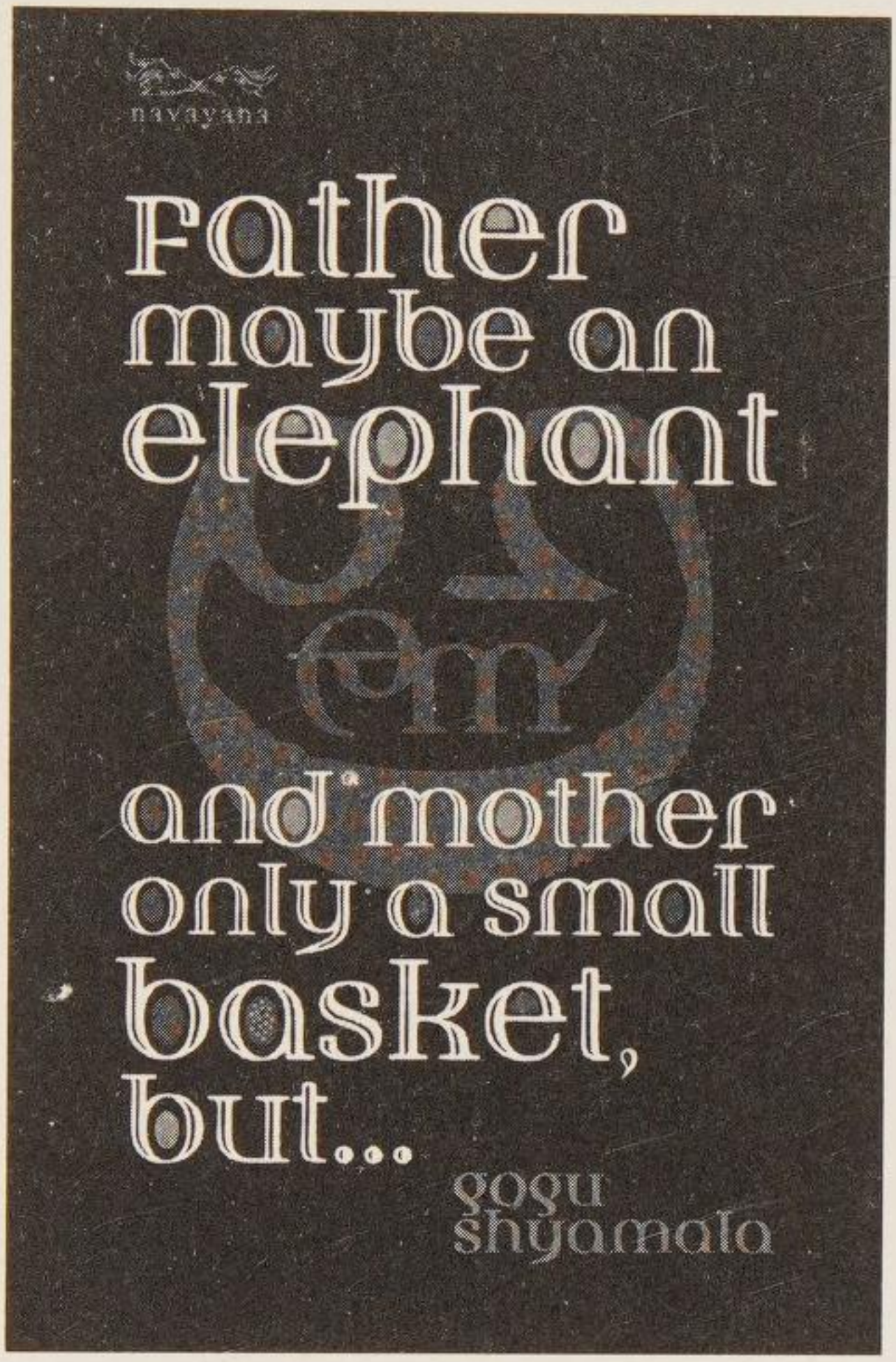

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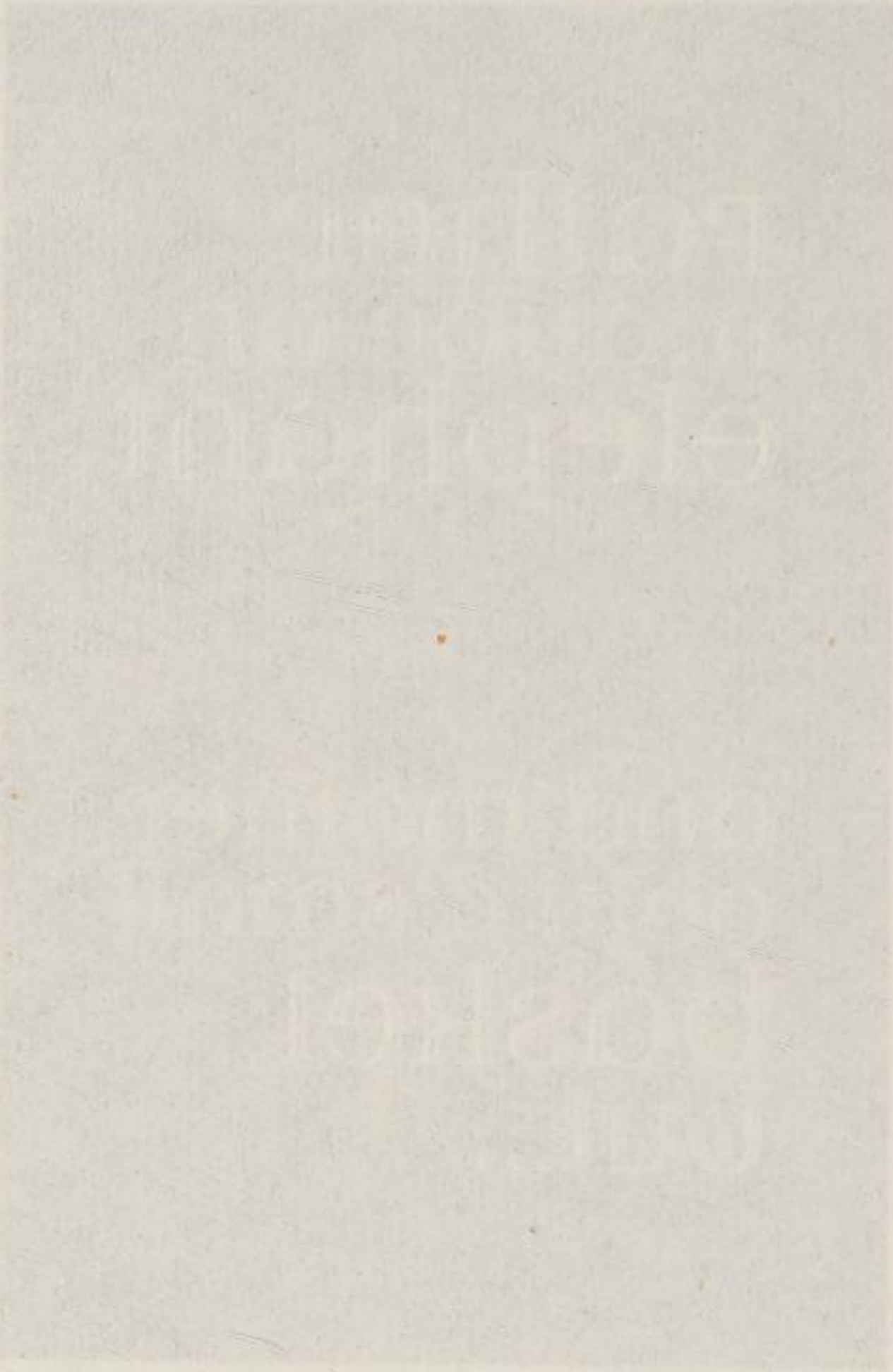

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